To Llywelyn W. Maddock

With the kind regards of

Gilbert Tabes. 1927

The Autobiography of a Book

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THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A BOOK

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By

GILBERT FABES

"Books, we know,
Are a substantial world, both pure and good;
Round these, with tendrils strong as flesh and blood,
Our pastime and our happiness will grow."

TENNYSON.

UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA LIBRARY

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TO MY FRIEND
H. S. O.

CHAPTER I

The first impressions of my youth live in my memory because I awakened to consciousness with my back feeling stiff and uncomfortable, which discomfort was later intensified when I was clothed in a new paper wrapper.

It was some slight consolation, however, to observe, upon glancing around, that in this respect I was not alone; all my brother books were being dressed similarly, and although the tightness in the region of our centre collations caused us some slight pain, we were satisfied, as we felt ourselves being placed in piles, that we looked very trim and neat.

My next recollection is of being divided into parties of twenty-five, packed back to front, and bundled together in a strong covering of brown paper, which completely prevented us from discerning night from day. It was, therefore, impossible for us to gauge how long our imprisonment lasted, but during this time we were taken upon a short jostling journey, and deposited in the close and stifling atmosphere of what I afterwards learned was a publisher's stockroom.

The information came to us through a slight tear in the brown paper which brought one of our number into touch with a book outside who said that he was a "damaged copy."

He told us that he had met a "careless person"

who had let him fall so heavily that he had crashed upon his corners, and had been sent home for re-binding.

So many wonderful stories were passed along to us of his experiences of the outside world that our young hearts panted with eager anticipation, and we could have jumped for joy had we not been so tightly bound down.

The time of our imprisonment passed slowly until one morning we felt ourselves lifted, then carried along in a rapidly moving vehicle, eventually being again left in doubt as to our whereabouts or our ultimate destination.

With the desperation of desire I attempted to work a hole in the brown paper, but the task proved to be beyond my strength, and I had almost given up hope when the wrapping was suddenly ripped open; the light of day burst in among us, temporarily depriving us of sight.

I was removed with several of my brothers, taken up a short flight of stairs, and placed upon a counter, which bore a magnificent array of books of all sizes and appearances.

Many looked quite grand and important, but others were small and insignificant, and seemed to wish to hide themselves behind the larger volumes.

Looking back, I must confess that I became proudly conscious of my new position. I felt that my presence outshone every other book upon the counter, especially those who were dressed in less attractive wrappers than my own. Later I received a lesson which taught me that it is not always the

appearance which counts—especially in regard to books—and that it is unwise to despise or praise without first discovering all that is to be learned.

Settling myself down happily amid the pile of my brothers (of whom there were twelve below me and two above), I rejoiced in the opportunity of seeing, for the first time, the world around, though at first the unaccustomed noise perturbed me.

After a short lapse of time an austere-looking gentleman with a high intellectual forehead and sharp features approached the counter, in company with a shorter man, who appeared to delight in displaying to his companion the volumes surrounding them.

When they reached my pile they stopped, and the little man said, "Here is Mr. John Scribes's new book, 'The Seeker,' published to-day. We believe it is the best he has written."

The tall gentleman took my brother from the hands of the other and looked through his pages carefully. "Yes; I will take this," he said, "for I find that John Scribes's philosophy is sound and very helpful to me; I have a first edition of each of his works."

"You are fortunate, sir," said the short man; "his books are realising high prices to-day, and I think this last will soon run out of print, for there is bound to be a big demand."

This was indeed good news to me, and contentedly I nudged my other brother's top side, and we chuckled inwardly.

I began to wonder where I should eventually

and a home, and felt glad that I had avoided the fate of some books who find themselves condemned to be just ordinary lending library copies. Theirs is a varied life, but very short; and they are soon discarded to be sold and re-sold, until they reach a state when they become valueless.

My thoughts were broken by the slight weight of my brother being lifted from my side, and glancing up I saw he was in the hands of a clever-looking lady, wearing big round spectacles, and looking very prosperous and wealthy. I felt sure that Fortune had crossed his path (how happy he would be in such hands!) when to my consternation the lady let him fall to the ground!

Stooping quickly, she picked him up and replaced him upon the pile, then walked away without even troubling to discover whether she had injured him, though the groans which he emitted were loud enough to be heard all over the shop.

Filled with sympathy, I asked him where he was hurt; he gasped that he thought his back strip was damaged and that his coat was torn and dirtied, and he felt sure nobody would buy him in that condition.

I tried to comfort him a little until, in a few minutes, the shop man came along, muttering something about "carelessness," took my brother away, and left me upon the top.

I prayed that I should not suffer the same fate as I studied the faces of the customers while they stood or passed by, hoping that this one would take me, or that that one would leave me.

During this state of trepidation a very beautiful lady with dancing blue eyes came to my counter and lifted me in her hands. She admired my binding, then opening me, turned my pages carefully with soft cool fingers, and evidently delighted with me, hurried me across to where a tall distinguished-looking man stood examining some other volumes. Touching his arm, she said sweetly, "You might buy me this one, dear. John Scribes's new book—will you?"

He took me from her, studied me with interest, and replied that if I were her choice he would be only too pleased.

So saying, he returned me to the beautiful lady, and taking a note from his case, handed it to the assistant who had approached to attend to his requirements. My new owner would not relinquish her hold of me, and as she fondly turned my pages I felt refreshed by the gentle caress of her hands, and for the first time since my publication I was able to stretch myself a little and ease the stiffness in my back.

She carried me along, clasping me to her breast and as I felt the soft beating of her heart against my covers I knew that she would learn to love me. This conviction caused me to conjure up visions of a future happy life in her possession.

I divined that her companion was her husband, for on our way home I caught snatches of their conversation, and once I heard him say that she could have many books to read, and then he spoke

of "the baby," and I wondered whether they were alluding to me.

By and by we entered a large building, and thence into a sweetly scented room where I was placed upon a table beside a large vase of flowers which bowed their heads toward me in greeting until I became proud, and swelled so much that I was fearful lest I should become loose in my binding, so controlled myself.

The sun was shining through the open window, and I could see the light fleecy clouds floating by; I fancied they passed more slowly when they saw me, and I felt happily conscious that I was the centre of attraction.

Close to the table was a large bookcase, highly polished, which reflected the light from the window, by the side of which my beautiful lady rested in a long wicker armchair.

Presently she rose, and crossing the room towards the table, lifted me and carried me to the bookcase, where she placed me in a standing position with my back outwards, upon a shelf among a number of other volumes which supported me upon either side.

When she had left the room these volumes began to jostle me rather unceremoniously, and my pride feeling wounded by what I deemed such an indignity, I said haughtily, "Perhaps you do not know that I am a First Edition."

This was the signal for a burst of merriment, and one gaily-covered book replied laughingly, "You are certainly, then, in very appropriate

company, Seeker, for here we are all First Editions, though many of us are more valuable than you."

Realising that silence would not commit me to any further foolish errors, I made no reply, but attempted to settle myself as comfortably as possible until such time when I should be taken out and perused by my charming mistress.

The time passed, and the light from the window began to lessen, till gradually the room became quite dark.

After a long time I heard the closing of doors; the house became very quiet; the books had long ceased their troubling, and I began to doze contentedly, feeling that, on the whole, I had enjoyed a very exciting first day.

CHAPTER II

That night I cannot forget, for upon the stroke of midnight the air was filled with the sound of many rustling leaves, so that I was obliged to quit my dreaming, when to my surprise I found that all the books upon the shelves had begun to move from their places.

Using their covers, and flapping their pages, they threaded their ways dexterously among each other, while as they journeyed they conversed in different tones with their neighbours.

Some spoke amorously, some humorously, others philosophically, while a few were singing or holding fierce debates among themselves.

These were the natural expressions of their souls, though I never heard any book attempt even to find fault with another, and this fact surprised me until later I learned that a really good book never criticised; it was done, of course, but such volumes were generally ostracised by the community.

I desired to join in the happy throng, and I tried to stretch myself, then to move along. My movements were at first painful and difficult, but soon I became more confident and able to increase my pace.

A few more moments of practice gave me all the strength that I desired, but my excitement was suddenly calmed when I discovered that I had

blindly made my way towards the side of the bookcase, which rose sheer above me.

I rested, and looked around me anxiously, hoping to meet with somebody with whom I could talk, when my glance fell upon a volume quite close to my side, but feeling uncertain of the nature of the reception which I should receive, I approached him nervously, and asked him if he needed my company.

Without seeming to notice me, he turned his back to me, which I thought very rude, until I looked at his title, now plainly to be seen, which was "Pride and Prejudice."

My annoyance overcame my discomfiture and I began to pass away, when he pulled gently at my front cover, quietly drew me to him, and said good naturedly, "I am not formed for ill-humour, I was born to please, so do not depart; I will talk with you, for I see that you are young and a new arrival with much to learn."

"Yes," I said tentatively, "I was only bought to-day; I cost fifteen shillings."

"Is that all!" he replied a little sarcastically, I thought. "And do you know how much I am worth, young one?"

"No!" I answeted decidedly.

He drew himself up to his full height and slowly and majestically said, "I am worth twenty-five pounds at least, that is with the help of my two brothers over there, for we make one complete book between us."

"Then you must be very old?" I asked, astounded.

"We were born in eighteen-thirteen," he replied, using the plural as one of his brothers approached. "We are very scarce now and quite difficult to find in good condition."

I felt a little awed to be in the company of this aged and valuable volume, so muttering inarticulately, I moved away, my newness seeming to be a sign of my youthful inexperience.

Thinking that I would find pleasure in talking to someone of my own age, I wandered along slowly towards the centre of the shelf, which, being less crowded, promised to give me the opportunity of obtaining a wider vision to assist my choice.

I had not been aware of the approach of a neatly clothed volume, dressed in very modern style, who touched me upon my back, causing me to look behind in surprise.

Very, very thin but sedate was this book, so thin that there was no room upon his back for his title, and I was inquisitive to know his name.

"Pardon my advances," he said in a far-away voice, "but I thought to meet some friend; you are not he, though I see that you are a new volume."

"Yes," I replied, "are you?"

"Hardly new, but ever fresh, my friend, if I be but four or five years old. Life to me is all a vision, and I live in the thoughts of young and old when sleep takes possession of their senses."

"Very strange," I muttered. "But won't you tell me your name?"

His voice changed into a tragic drawl which seemed to linger around me, and he said slowly, "I am 'The Dream,' by John Masefield; I tell of 'woven knights in coloured silks, old music, old panels and dim passages'—I dream."

I became so impressed by his manner of speech that a suitable answer to his conversation evaded me, but being young and curious, I said, "Are you worth a great deal?"

Annoyance crept into his voice, when after a short pause he replied, "My worth is not my cost or my published price, but the beauty of my author's work inscribed within me, though because you ask me, I may tell you that since I was published my value has steadily increased to even four or five times my original price; yet I was issued at seven shillings and sixpence. Within me dwells the name of my author and that of his life's partner, written in their own hands, that I may live with the touch of their fingers upon me."

These words made me realise that I, perhaps, would one day become valuable, and though I had not been signed by my author I knew that public opinion would ultimately decide my true worthiness.

I turned to ask my companion a further question, but to my consternation I could not see him anywhere, look where I would. "The Dream" had vanished!

Presently I heard the sound of singing in a language which I knew to be French, and the words once heard haunt me still:

" Au clair de la Lune,
Mon ami Pierrot !
Prête moi ta plume
Pour écrire un mot.
Ma chandelle est morte . . .
Je n'ai pas de feu !
Ouvre moi ta porte
Pour l'amour de Dieu ! "

Three times the verse was repeated. First without any strength of expression, the second time, with a little more expression, but no louder ; and the third time, softly and deep and sadly—so sadly appealing that I was moved to tears though I knew not the meaning of the words.

All the books seemed to be drawn with one accord to hearken to the voice of the singer, and a great quiet spread over the shelf, but as the song softly ended they all rustled their leaves in a wild applause, and I copied them, wishing for a repetition of the song.

Again the noise of the chattering of many books filled the air, and seemingly the song and the singer had already been forgotten.

My innate curiosity led me in the direction from which the magic voice had come, and I determined that I must talk with the wonderful singer.

My path was obstructed by a lightly built book which had purposely laid himself before me, and as I attempted to pass by him he gripped me by my covers and said, " Where are you going, young man ? "

I attempted to free myself from his clutches, but he only held me with a firmer grip, so I replied

somewhat diffidently that I desired to find the singer of the beautiful French verse which I had just heard.

The book shook himself a little knowingly and said, "Ah! I thought so! All the young men are lured to 'Trilby' like moths to a candle flame, charmed by her singing. Go! Learn your lesson, for there in yonder corner is she whom you seek."

I followed his glance and saw three volumes gathered together, talking excitedly, sometimes in French and sometimes in English. All three seemed to be in unison, yet there was something which divided them—some mysterious influence which dominated them.

My informant turned and had begun to walk away ere I could thank him, but I caught the flashing of his title before he disappeared into the gloom—"The Earthly Paradise," by one William Morris. Then I became aware that I held in my hand a slip of paper which he had evidently thrust into it as I stood lost in admiration.

Upon it was written a verse, which I read where I stood:

"Dreamer of Dreams, born out of my due time,
Why should I strive to set the crooked straight?
Let it suffice that my murmuring rhyme
Beats with light wing against the ivory gate,
Telling a tale not too importunate
To those who in the sleepy region stay
Lulled by the singer of an empty day."

Reading this, not as a warning, but as an

expression of the overflowing of a generous nature, I pressed the paper between my pages, and gathering courage, determined to approach the fascinating singer.

As I drew nearer each of the three volumes looked in my direction.

One stood straight and with a most winning natural gesture seemed to beckon me onward.

The second of the three stood masterfully and commandingly as if controlling the others, and leered at me with eyes that pierced me through and through until I felt most uncomfortable.

The third manœuvred cleverly for a favourable position, regarding me with a kindly look which seemed to spread happiness around him, and looking at them I wondered at the oddness of the trinity.

To the third volume I introduced myself and stated my wish, asking if I could be introduced to the other two, which seemed to give him great pleasure, for he said genially, " Certainly—a pleasure —at once ! "

Turning me with a sweep of his covers towards the first volume, he half sang, " Here is ' Trilby ' ! My other volume is the great ' Svengali ' ! " while he added merrily, " Behold in me, an artist free, known by all as ' Little Billee ' ! "

Then he subsided into the shadows, as the ominous visaged Svengali came forward, fastening me with a penetrating expression until he took me firmly in his powerful grasp as in a vice, and said, " This is my wife—Trilby. No ! La la Svengali yes ! She is beautiful—is she not ? "

I stammered, striving to form a reply which would not come; praying for the power of expression which would allow me to pour forth a veritable torrent of appreciation.

The foreign-looking Svengali impatiently awaited my reply, and at last, evidently taking my hesitation as a demur, said almost savagely, "Himmel! You are ignorant—you! You do not know! You cannot see!"

He gripped my covers until I thought that my breath would fail. I wished to explain, to voice the expressions which would not come.

"Ho—ho—you do not know the great 'Trilby'—the three of us—written by the great George—George du Maurier—we who are worth two hundred francs—two hundred francs* —pah!"

With this outburst he gave me a hard push which sent me flying, and as I controlled my straggling pages I heard a burst of loud chuckling. I looked back and saw that he held his sides and was laughing boisterously, evidently delighted at my discomfiture. I became disappointed and wandered away, for the pleasure of talking with the fascinating "Trilby la Svengali" had been denied me.

* * * * *

My wanderings upon this, my first night of freedom amongst my kind, had not been attended with a plentiful amount of pleasure, and I was a little perturbed at the somewhat rough manner of my treatment; but now that I am older the events

* Ordinary exchange rate.

of that night, and those which followed, can be viewed with an equanimity born of experience.

I was ignorant then of the knowledge that every volume breathed its own individuality upon every possible occasion, and as we were able in the dark to find our way by the light which shone from within us, so it was natural for every book to talk in the style in which it had been written.

Sometimes this caused one so inexperienced as myself to be disconcerted, but later I developed a sense of humour and a courage which had been given to me by my author.

He was, I learned, a literary critic and was fond of delving and digging amongst books. Sometimes he even found himself in hot water owing to his candour, though he was free of any malicious thoughts. His criticisms, though at times seemingly drastic, were always intended to be constructive, and to those who knew his ways he was known as a true friend, helpful and sympathetic.

From such a parentage as this had I sprung, and it was therefore natural that I should be restless; wandering to and fro in search of knowledge of the values of books and particulars of their fine points or peculiarities. A generally accepted standard of talk among books is a knowledge of their values, and the social status of one or another is known by the price which had been paid for it, though the ability to converse in true literary style sometimes places a book high amongst its fellows.

On the other hand it may be that a book of no

seeming merit has great value attached to it, though conversationally they are great dunderheads and give themselves airs which ill become them.

I heard that in the world of humans, this is sometimes the case too ; some folks being wealthy and often holding fine titles, socially overshadowing more useful members of society. Books may be thought valuable, because of their rarity, and I have wondered if the uniqueness of wealth accounts for so much nonsense within the world of people.

When in later years my adventures took me into the saleroom I came into contact with a very rusty-looking volume, who looked unworthy to grace the shelves of any respectable library.

His conversation was carried on in German, and though I could not understand all that he said to me, I knew enough to learn that he was an aristocrat among books, despite the fact that he was conversationally a bore.

It seems that he contained very little printed matter at all, some having been partially destroyed, which made it particularly difficult for him to piece his sentences together, but I was interested in his history.

He was called a " Blockbook " and was born in Germany in the fifteenth century, being over four hundred years old, and I marvelled greatly at the age of this wonderful old volume.

Printed upon one side of the page only, he said that he was made by having an impression taken by rubbing each page over a specially prepared

wood block, which had been carved and smeared with ink.

Willingly, he consented to open his leaves for me and to spread himself for my inspection.

I saw that upon each page was a curious design, around which was printed in heavy letters the reading matter, very much out of date and looking black and clumsy.

Yet a distinct beauty pervaded the pages which held me spellbound, though I failed to see how the reader would obtain value for his money in printing matter, for nowadays people expect thousands of words for a few shillings, and I do not believe he would have been a success had he been produced to-day.

I felt sorry for the old book and thanked him effusively for showing me his workmanship, but fearing to cause him pain, though desirous of knowing his value, which I thought would be small, I said in a most matter-of-fact tone, "I suppose that your age is against your value and——"

"My child," said he, "though I am so old, think not that I am of little account, for my last master paid over one thousand pounds for me!"

I gasped with astonishment—surely the old book was wandering!

"Yes," he continued, "you look surprised, but I can assure you that this was a very reasonable price, and I am expected to fetch much more in the sale to-morrow, for many American buyers await my number."

I left him, saying that I would listen for the

bidding which would seal his destination, perhaps for many hundreds of years.

On the morrow the auction-room was filled with eager buyers, and when my late acquaintance came before them a stir swept round the room, while the bidding rose briskly until finally the auctioneer's hammer fell at exactly fifteen hundred pounds!

This incident taught me a severe lesson, for though I had felt awed in the great book's presence, I had failed to recognise his immense value through the dirt of ages; he appeared so uneducated and egotistical, but something wonderfully impressive hung around him, impressing me much more deeply than the evidence of the value which was set upon him.

* * * * *

I have often found the values of books a surprise to me, and have long since realised that the most valuable books are not always the splendid folk which they deem themselves to be, and since the experiences of my first night in the bookcase I have learned many things which will find expression in my story.

CHAPTER III

My acquaintance with my fellow-books soon ripened into a closer understanding, and I began to enjoy the life in my first home, which was enriched by many happy hours spent at night in their learned company, for you must know that books only dare to converse among themselves when the world is a-sleeping; the power of movement being theirs only between the hours of midnight and the dawning of a new day.

Sometimes it happens that a book is left behind in the rush which comes at the first glimpse of daylight, and this accounts for many mislaid books which are searched for by their owners, and I have known the case of one book which actually hid himself in sheer devilry.

Though such a crime is not generally looked upon with favour in the world of books, I could never bring myself to blame him, for he was named "The Elusive Pimpernel," and I, at any rate, realised that it was his nature that was responsible for his escapade.

The dawn of my first morning crept into the sky and I hastened with all the other volumes to set myself in my correct place, and I welcomed the enforced rest, for the unusual exercise of the night had fatigued me.

I began to anticipate the joy of being read for the first time, for I longed to give my soul to the

enjoyment of a human being, and my beautiful mistress would, I knew, drink of me with a gladdened heart.

The sun had begun to touch the edge of the library table, when the door of the room opened and she entered, dressed in a charming gown of delicate blue which matched her lovely eyes.

The flowers upon the table attracted her attention at first, but soon she stepped lightly across the room and opened the door of the bookcase.

Her eyes immediately met mine, and with a pleased expression she took me into her hands and carried me with her to the restfulness of a large couch by the window.

Here for a moment she paused as if in thought, then with a glance at my cover, which till now had remained concealed within my paper wrapper, her face lit with pleasure as she laid her hands gently upon me.

I knew that I rested in the care of a true book lover, for the sense of comfort in her touch remains with me still, as, opening me slowly and gently, she eased my back by taking me in both hands with the fingers of each one pressing against my covers from the outside, and rested her thumbs upon the margins of my pages.

She opened first one section, then another, going carefully through all of my leaves, and let them slide through her fingers several times, until I found myself open at the first page ready for good service.

I was free from any nasty kinks in my back or

the discomfiture of any broken threads, which destroys the appearance and respectability of many books, and I gave myself for her enjoyment.

We spent a pleasant hour together and the echoes of her thoughts dwelt in the momentary flushes which illumined her cheeks as she read with interest the wisdom of my words.

Not merely sipping and tasting of my more attractive passages, but giving to each separate thought the attention which all authors wish to obtain from their readers, and I knew that my master would have been gratified to have seen the pleasure which I gave.

I thought as I rested in her hands that authors lose a great deal of pleasure derived from their works, for excepting a few reviews, or a few biased appreciations from friends, they do not glean any of the moments of joy resulting from their creativeness.

Sometimes an author remains unappreciated until he has left the world, which I think is very, very sad, for death plays his hand with a grim smile when he draws the world's attention to the fact that a genius has passed from among them, leaving behind that which remained unread during his lifetime.

A short time ago I came into contact with a newspaper who told me that he had been very busy with articles written upon the "Hudson Controversy," and I asked him to tell me more.

"Oh," he said, in the manner of a specialist, "it's all because a memorial has been erected in

Hyde Park to the great naturalist, 'W. H. Hudson,' who through the power of his love told to a blinded world of the beauties which dwelt amongst them, and because a sculptor named Epstein created a panel for the memorial which upset the susceptibilities of a lot of people who had never read Hudson."

"Then," I replied, "was not Hudson well known before his death?"

"That's just it," answered the newspaper, "he wasn't—but we newspapers keep 'em up to it, especially as it makes good reading when there are no murder trials about!"

"Oh! I suppose that copies of the first editions of his works will be valuable now?"

"First editions? I know nothing about first editions of books—we have no first editions in our line—only sporting editions—late night specials—midday editions and such like."

Nevertheless, I find that my assumption was correct and that the works of Hudson are increasing in value and will doubtless continue to do so, while his genius is appreciated by an ever-growing number of literary connoisseurs.

* * * * *

Not once while I rested in my mistress's hands did she strain or press upon me in any way, and it was with a sense of satisfaction that I noted that her progress through my pages was leisurely.

At length she laid me upon the couch, open at the page which she had just finished, and stepping across to a bureau, brought back with her a very

thin, neat bookmark, which she placed in between my pages, then replaced me in the bookcase, leaving me greatly refreshed by the pleasant exercise.

The bookmark meanwhile had settled himself unobtrusively within me, and soon began to ask me questions relating to my contents. He was very learned, and having had a varied experience of life, had taken advantages of his opportunities to such an extent that he was a very deep-natured and interesting companion.

He was an adept at fun or philosophy and could discourse on all subjects, for his homes had been between the pages of many books, from which he had drawn the nectar of their contents.

My heart was young, and I welcomed this slip of concentrated knowledge, and though he was my prisoner I felt that I was no gaoler, but rather that he was an honoured guest within me.

The soft and continual beating of his heart against my pages made me believe that I must hold him close to me lest he should fall, and so lose his place and vex my beautiful lady.

We talked together of many things during our companionship when the freedom hours gave us the opportunity for undisturbed conversation, and he promised that when night fell he would tell me something of his life and experiences, which in his own manner he did, while I listened attentively to his fascinating story.

CHAPTER IV

"WELL," began the bookmark with a philosophic sigh, "here is another home and another change, bringing with it fresh readings decreed to give me still more wisdom and learning, and I welcome your pages and trust to be of good service to you."

I thanked him for his courtesy and replied that I should feel delighted to shelter him, and hoped that my matter would be acceptable to his ideas upon life.

"Oh, you need have no fears, friend 'Seeker,' for such is the nature of my life that I find something of interest even in the dullest book, and though I do not know yet exactly the kind of book you are, I believe that Chance has thrown me into good company."

"You have had many homes?" I queried.

"Yes, many. Some good, some bad, some so cheerless that I wondered at their success, and others so gay that I often found it difficult to keep my decorum."

"Have you met many valuable books?" I then asked.

"More than I can remember—though I have a good memory and a weakness for obtaining knowledge about the status of those with whom I mix."

"That is rather human, is it not?"

"I suppose so, but at the same time quite amusing and fascinating. I have found many of the most

valuable books cheerless, whilst others of little monetary value have been sturdy companions."

"Do you like old books or new publications best?" I asked.

"The moderns are much more exciting, though I find that many of them have a mistaken opinion of their utility, and the cheeky minxes of fashionable novels give themselves airs, because they are the pets of to-day, but *I* know that they will be forgotten to-morrow."

"What is the reason for their temporary popularity?"

"There are many reasons," he replied. "Their authors may have a *flair* for laying bare with subtle touches the vices and virtues of the day, whilst others may depict with faithful accuracy the lives of their most dilettante readers—and naturally, when a reader finds that a novelist knows a great deal of his or her life, he is considered to be a splendid psychological crystal-gazer, and recommendation causes a rapid run on the first editions."

"Then you think that first editions of popular novels are unstable companions?"

"Generally, yes—though I do not condemn all first editions of novels. Many of those by Joseph Conrad, for example, are of great value and worthily deserve the high opinion which they have earned."

My innate curiosity was aroused and I wished to learn more of the subject, so I asked, "Will you not tell me something of your journeys among

first editions, that I can know the company with whom I may mix?"

"With pleasure," he replied; "and having mentioned Conrad, I will tell you of some of the peculiarities of his first editions which have caused them to be of value, for I have searched among them and discovered many tiny or seemingly trivial inaccuracies within them which will interest you."

"I shall indeed be interested," I echoed, clasping him warmly to me in my enthusiasm.

He met my glance and began:

"You would perhaps avoid a book which holds a flagrant imperfection, but I recently came into contact with a copy of Conrad's 'Arrow of Gold' which actually rejoiced in the fact that he had dropped a letter 'A' from his title heading on page 67, for this had increased his value from an average of a dozen shillings to nearly three times the amount."

I showed my surprise with an ejaculated "Oh!"

"Yes," he continued, "and a brother book of his, 'Notes on Life and Letters,' was even more fortunate in this respect, for *two* letters had been inadvertently omitted from his contents page, which should have read 'Tales from the Sea,' but was changed to 'Tales of the E'—he! he!"

I smiled at his sense of humour and at the strangeness of these "points."

"Apart from the omission of letters, I have found that other books are thought more valuable because of other unusual errors or changes, and John Masefield's 'Martin Hyde' was sent out in

various different coloured cloths, but chocolate is the colour which is most sought after by collectors, making the edition worth twice as much as the others, which are valued at about twelve shillings."

"Then again—a few years ago I was bookmark to a copy of Joseph Conrad's 'Chance,' and one day our master came in hurriedly and looked anxiously at the title page, where he found to his evident delight that which he sought.

"It transpired that this was a copy with the date of 1913 upon the title page, and it appears that the book was not actually issued until the date of the title page had been altered to 1914, and but a few copies had escaped the revision.

"My master took the book from among us, and later we were joined by many new books who informed us that they had been purchased as the result of the sale of this copy of 'Chance' for twenty-five pounds!"

"Oh," I said hopefully, "I wonder whether *I* have anything wrong with me which will make me valuable."

"You never know your luck," answered the bookmark, "for modern publications are often subject to a misprint or an error, which at once labels them as 'unique' copies if they are on the collector's list, and that is why many persons buy the first issues at the earliest possible time."

"Does our master buy all first editions," I queried.

"Mostly," he replied, "though he buys so many books that I have been unable to inspect them all,

and the mistress is just as bad. Why, I do believe that they sometimes go without their meals so that they may purchase new books!"

"I wonder if they went without their lunch to buy me," I said quizzically.

"No, I don't think so, for they are in funds lately—something to do with dividends, I fancy; but lor' bless you, they spend it as quickly as they get it—and you're a bit of the last dividend, I believe, though I shouldn't wonder if they sell some of their old friends soon."

"Do they often sell their books then?"

"No, only now and again, but I understand that another new arrival is expected—a baby—and when the last one came, quite a lot of books were sold to meet the expenses, for though grown-ups may be able to feed upon books they are of no use to babies."

"Well, well," I answered, "I hope that I shall not be one of the first to go when the time comes, for I feel that I am 'bound' for a life of adventure, and that makes me fearful because of my lack of experience."

"That you have learned to pun proves that you have still much to learn," replied the bookmark, "but talking of binding reminds me that it is not always the binding which makes a book valuable. Most of the works of Charles Dickens were issued in parts—in green paper wrappers—and in this state they are of considerably more value than if bound in expensive leathers.

"'Pickwick Papers,' for instance, is worth about

six hundred pounds in the original parts, but bound in the finest calf would perhaps be worth about one-tenth of this."

I failed to grasp the truth of this remark, but did not dare to voice my opinion.

"The habit of issuing books in this form has passed by with the increasing cheapness of bindings, and to-day most books are issued in cloth and covered with attractive paper wrappers, which now and again are brighter than the contents they enclose.

"You are of a class of book which is produced in large numbers at the present time, and as you will probably meet with many strangers I hope that my talk will help you to choose your associates with a discriminating mind.

"Talking of associating reminds me of yet another class of book which is appreciated by collectors—that of the 'association copy'—so called because they contain a signature of the author or some other writing. The value of such a book may be illustrated by mentioning that a copy of Conrad's 'Chance' dated 1913, signed by the author as a presentation copy, would bring our master enough money to enable him to keep *two* babies for a year at ten shillings a week each!"

His allusion to the babies made me wonder if they were made like books, and I asked him if this was so.

My question amused him and he laughed loudly, so loudly indeed, that I thought that he would attract unwelcome attention from the surrounding volumes,

and I hastened to quiet him with anxious admonishments.

Presently, his amusement at my expense died down and he became suddenly thoughtful and made no sound; I waited while he seemed to show a certain remorse for his conduct, which had troubled me a little.

His voice when at last he spoke was soft and pleasing, falling upon my ear with a cadence which seemed far away, and his eyes filled with a look of deepest sympathy as he said:

" ' Where did you come from, baby dear?
Out of the everywhere into here——'

" I remember reading these lines in a book of poetry, my friend, and they were written with expressions of love born of such a question as your own, and to these I must add just three lines which may breathe a fragrance into your heart as beautiful and wonderful as our mistress:

" ' Thou, while thy babies around thee cling,
Shall show us how divine a thing
A woman may be made.' "

I thought the bookmark had dwelt with my question somewhat enigmatically, but the wonder of the words which he had spoken held within them an explanation which at the time did not serve to show sufficient excuse for his previous merriment, but later, when I grew wiser, I knew that he had dealt with my question in a masterful manner.

While I pondered over his reply I looked

pensively out of the window and I saw that the dawn had begun to appear through a mist left by the moon and the lesser lights of the night, and at once all the books began to return to their positions ready to welcome the daylight.

Soon we had assumed again that quiet look which all human beings know and once more we were ready for their service.

CHAPTER V

The following evening, after I had spent other happy hours in the company of my mistress—the bookmark resting between fresh pages—was a prelude to one of the most exciting nights which I can remember.

Even now, when I think back upon it, I can recall every word and incident as if all happened but yesterday. As age comes upon me I oft-times feel a little ashamed of the apparent hotheadedness of my youth, though philosophically I comfort myself with the thoughts that I was not alone in the wild unmerciful happenings of that night. . . .

The sun had set late behind a heavy bank of ominous clouds shedding an unaccustomed light upon us, and we watched the last lights disappear, feeling grateful that at last the long hot day had ended; our hopes were set upon a cool respite which we imagined would come with the sun's sleeping.

The closely packed volumes all awaited the coming of the freedom hours, as we called them. I could see that many of the older standard works —heavily bound in massive covers of calf and morocco—showed signs of the strain of the heat of the day, and I felt sorry for them.

These sturdy servants of the book-lover would never have been able to withstand the hectic life of the modern novel, I am sure, but advancing

years seemed to give them a stamina sufficient to endow them with power to survey calmly the happenings of the world around them. Their corners were rubbed by many handlings and their titles had been dimmed by the light of many days.

I had sometimes thought that several of these seemed somewhat snobbish, but then, they were justly proud in many cases, for a number of them had numerous volumes to their names which in itself was sufficient to give them an important space upon the shelves, anyhow!

The hot night drew on without any appreciable change in the oppressive atmosphere, and my nearest neighbour—a book on Arctic exploration—even had the greatest difficulty in keeping cool, and the breath from his pages gave little relief to those in close contact with him.

At last the welcome chimes of the old grandfather clock began the doleful tune which betokened the first stroke of midnight.

Before the last had died away a vivid flash of light illumined the room, temporarily blinding us with its intensity; the sky seemed to crash down upon us and the house shook to its foundations.

All the volumes were transfixed to their places, incapable of moving, and the gilt-edged ones in particular wore an expression of pallor out of harmony with their general appearance of security, for they had reflected the full light from the tongue of fire.

Other books showed distinct signs of nervousness, but I noticed that the portly philosophical

works were comparatively calm and slightly rustled their pages, as if searching for passages within themselves to soothe their minds.

One old book muttered apprehensively, "'Tis the heavens upheaving in their passions, and in remorse the clouds shed tears—listen then—do ye not hear?"

Our hearts stood still while we heard from without a rapid pattering as of the sound of myriad fairy feet treading the leaves of the old trees close to the window. Quicker and quicker they fell until it was impossible to distinguish the difference from the sound of the rain and the increasing violence of the wind.

Swis-s-h! Swis-s-s! A flash—then a roll—so deep and masterful, so mighty and yet so grand that it seemed to sweep the sky with an inviolable force that I thought that even the stars would be swept away in the fury, and that their friendly twinkle would be seen no more.

Flash! Crash!! Almost together in a bewildering violence the heavens smote and gleamed their rage; quicker still came the remorseless rain, when suddenly a great hurrying and scurrying from the back of the bookcase sent a breath of panic through us. All the books began to whirl around in a wild frenzy of excitement—hither and thither—until we found ourselves drawn as if upon a string, one after the other.

I found myself being hustled and jostled in that stricken throng, unable to control my steps, and a strange tingling within my pages emanating from

my print excited me to a desire to discover the reason for this strange upheaval which had now developed into a mad and exhilarating chase.

A heavy, clumsy and highly polished calf volume dashed by me, nearly throwing me off my balance, and I heard him shouting loudly in a high-pitched voice, yet half singing, the following stirring exhortation :

" Unrivalled the 'ounds o'er which Jorrocks presides !
Then 'way wi' the fox 'ounds,
The 'igh mettled fox 'ounds,
'Way for the 'ounds o'er which Jorrocks presides ! "

He whirled around and made straight at me, aiming a blow which I fortunately deftly avoided, shouting, " Come up ! ' Seeker.' For'd, lad ! For'd ! ! Storm is up—hunt is up ! Yoicks—tally ho ! At 'im, ' Seeker,' good boy ! "

Strangely enough I felt a great desire to be " at 'im," whoever " 'im " might be, and the spirit of the chase caught me in its strong grip as I began to sense a faint yet alluring scent which pervaded the air ; making me redouble my efforts in an endeavour to track to its source the magnet of attraction.

I threw away all dignity and put forth every ounce of my power to gain a place with the leaders of the rushing throng, where ahead I could see the portly volume urging his followers into renewed efforts by the galvanic power of his voice.

Along went poetry, belles-lettres, biographies, fiction, histories and books upon almost every conceivable subject, and I even saw one or two

of a decidedly religious frame of mind caught in the all-embracing enthusiasm.

One small volume, however, whom I chanced to meet stood wistfully aside, gazing through the glass panels of the bookcase, and I heard him remonstrate mournfully as I passed, "'Tis but a fox they chase; I would that it were an otter, for this rain betokens a fair stream for all good anglers on the morrow."

I would have been pleased to have stopped to talk with him, for I felt that he could have enlightened me with a wise explanation of the cause of the riot, but the spirit within me urged me onwards and I surged forward with the throng.

Perhaps it was owing to the lightness of my text or because I had the young blood of youth to give me speed, that I soon found myself close to the fine old calf volume at the head of the chase, and for the first time I was able to see his title which flashed in gilt letters. It was "Handley Cross," by R. S. Surtees, but the voice which emanated from within his pages gave no explanation for the well-lead enthusiasm.

I had no time to reflect, and as I speeded past other books I caught a view of one named "Orley Farm," then another with the title "Treasure Island," until presently I caught a fleeting glimpse of a blue-bound volume which seemed to be straining in every fibre to get away from us.

"Tally ho! Yonder he goes," shouted the Jorrocks volume as the little book leaped forward out of sight again with a jump which must have

loosened his covers, when *Flash* went the lightning and *Crash* again came the thunder.

I had soon outstripped the rest of the hunters and began to find myself in strange quarters, when I thought that I saw a glimpse of a blue cover half hidden in a deep recess of the bookcase.

I hastened to the spot, filled with a desire to discover the name which he bore ; as I approached I could see that he was panting heavily with the exertions of the chase, and leaned against the side of the case for support.

He looked at me with eyes full of tender appeal as I came nearer to him, and the hunted look gradually faded when pityingly, I asked him if he had sustained any hurt.

For a few moments he made no answer, while we heard afar the sounds of many rushing volumes who had evidently been outwitted by the cleverness of this strange little book, but with an effort of control he said unsteadily, " No, friend ' Seeker,' only tired."

" What is your name, little one ? " I then asked.

" Reynard the Fox," he replied slowly.

" And your author ? "

" John Masefield."

" Oh, then you are hunted because you are of value ? "

" I am often sought for by human beings, being considered the finest product of my author's mind, and my value of some thirty shillings is very reasonable, I believe."

"Then why are you subjected to the indignity of being hunted as you have been to-night?"

"Oh, there is no indignity—for I really revel in the chase, knowing that my author was good enough to allow me to escape death at the hands of the howling pack—and the storm of to-night has had the effect of allowing many well-meaning books to lose their normal control."

I ruminated that I too had lost my control, and the explanation of the now well recovered "Reynard" did not entirely dispel my shamed thoughts, and I turned away from him, for the first faint gleam of dawn had already begun to trickle through the window-panes.

CHAPTER VI

The scene of the previous night's hunt was the fourth shelf from the bottom of the bookcase, where I had been hurriedly placed by my mistress, which consequently caused me to be introduced to many new friends. I was becoming more used to the company of books by now, and their vagaries and their idiosyncrasies were understandable and replete with meaning.

It must not be thought, however, that I was nonchalant. As a matter of fact I began to enjoy my life more every day, though when one rubs shoulders with a variety of characters the effect is bound to make one a little "knowledgeable" anyhow.

My wanderings in life have been so extensive that I am, naturally, unable to recollect all that has happened to me. Many of my literary adventures are too trivial for me to describe, so that my story will not lose anything in merit by the omission of those happenings. I have no doubt that there are numerous incidents in my life which would be interesting to the majority of my readers, but I am writing this story under circumstances of stress, and it is my purpose to finish my work before I am discovered and released from the pestiferous atmosphere which surrounds me in my present circumstances.

The memories of many nights spent in the

happy environment of my first home often arise to comfort me in opposition to less pleasing soliloquies; my little journeys among the goodly fellowship of those most companionable books serve to allow me to live them over again, in these writings of my adventures.

Among those memories I cherish above all the caress of the hands which held me when I was first read, but the many hours of enjoyment which I extended to my beautiful lady came to an end all too quickly, and when she laid me down for the last time I was grieved that I should see no more the bewitching sweep of her downcast eyes.

To my chagrin, I also lost the companionship of my interesting bookmark, and this loss at the time seemed so infinitely great that I determined to use all my powers in an endeavour to discover him and to get him back.

I did not know then, as I do now, that I should be committing one of the gravest sins which it is possible to perpetrate in our world.

This action is looked upon as disgraceful, for it is the cause of a reader losing his place which, besides being annoying, is one of those things for which a human being cannot easily account.

Now and again the true cause of the trouble could be traced to the sinfulness of a covetous book if a good knowledge of book lore was understood by humans.

Upon the night of my dual sorrow I began to search the shelves for my late companion, knowing that he rested between the pages of another book,

for I had closely watched my mistress in her actions.

The stroke of the first hour of freedom sent me hurrying along around and about each volume, though I attempted to appear calm and unassuming as I sidled close to first one book, then to another, softly calling for my friend.

I would have to be wary. I did not wish to arouse suspicion, and would have to arrange that my bookmark must slip between my pages unobserved.

The first volume which I attempted to investigate was a first edition of Rudyard Kipling's "Plain Tales from the Hills," published in the year 1888 and worth at least eight pounds.

I was startled to hear him rustle his pages, and in a mysterious far-set voice say, "What is in the Brahman's book that is in the Brahman's heart? Neither you nor I knew that there was so much sin in the world."

I stood still, not daring to move, and then lifting my eyes, saw that he appeared unconscious of having spoken, and I thought that after all he had only been breathing rather heavily of the text within him, for I did not believe that I acted at all suspiciously.

My wanderings were, I thought, free from observation, but I have learned to know since that books may reason within themselves and that their powers of perception are infinitely finer than many human beings would credit them with.

I was determined to pursue my course. I would

not be deterred by any doubts or fears and moved slowly in the direction of another book.

This was of a different type, and I thought that I would be better advised to engage him in conversation, and try to glean from him in an unguarded moment whether he harboured the object of my search.

He was clothed in black buckram and his neatly gilt titled back told me that his name was "Tommy and Grizel," by J. M. Barrie, a writer of considerable charm, whose works do not reach as high a price as the standard of excellence which they hold.

My approach had been witnessed by this light-hearted book, and he said airily, "Ah, I have not seen you before. Who are *you?*"

I replied that I was "The Seeker," and had only been finished having been read that day.

"I believe that you do not even know who I am!" he exclaimed.

"Yes," I said, "I have seen your title—you are 'Tommy and Grizel,' by James Barrie."

"Partly correct or rather half-right," he said, "for my name—my full name—is Tommy on the book—but Thomas Sandys in full."

"I—I am—pleased to meet you," I stammered a little guiltily.

His reply was only just "Thank you," but somehow I felt sure that he had discovered the secret of my purpose and had penetrated through my deceit, so feeling a little wretched I moved quietly away.

At every available opportunity I called my late

friend. Once I fancied I heard a faint answering call, and made my way in the direction from which it came, but it was only the voice of an old Bible. He stood solemnly chanting the verse of a psalm, and his natural beauty was illumined from within by a light, which shone upon my face so brilliantly that I hurried past.

Though in themselves books are a means of communication, I feared to ask for assistance in my quest, for though I had not committed a sin I began to feel that I was watched, and yet the determination to discover the whereabouts of my bookmark never left me, and I persisted in my search regardless of the consequences.

I turned my steps towards a few modern publications in a far-off corner. I knew that my mistress was devotedly fond of reading the latest publications. The varied coloured wrappers of these gaily clothed books provided a pleasing scene.

The first book which I encountered was in every way similar to the hunted "Reynard the Fox," and curiosity made me approach closely, but I saw that this was not "Reynard" but a book entitled "The Daffodil Fields," by the same author; I thought that a sufficient excuse for conversation and I said, "Have you a brother—one Reynard, who was shamefully hunted on the night of the recent storm?"

"Yes," he answered softly, and added in a caressing tone, "Seeker—come! I know your generous mind and that you aided him in his

misfortune, and as I love him even more than you love your lost friend, I will show you where you may find him whom you seek, even as you succoured him whom I love."

Something in his voice breathed sorrow and a complete understanding of the fears which beset me. My youthful heart was stirred with responsive emotions; I felt that this neat trim volume would well guard my discovered secret.

To him therefore I unburdened my troubles, and in the course of the conversation I learned that he was born in the year nineteen thirteen, and that he had been purchased for thirty shillings. Our master and mistress often read him and his brothers, of whom he had a large number all clothed alike.

Our conversation drifted from the hunt to my purpose, and my disappointment at losing my friend made me sadly in need of the consoling words which drifted from his pages in a beautiful rhythm. At last he said with a tone of finality, drawing me closely to him, "Seeker—friend—I hold within me something of greater consequence to you than solacing sentences, and I bid you look—and behold—*our* friend!"

I followed his opened pages and saw, resting in the calm embrace of this sweet natured book—the bookmark!

The joy of discovery eclipsed the appreciation which I should have had for my friendly "Daffodil Fields," and I welcomed the bookmark to me with joyousness.

Suddenly in the midst of my joy I wondered

whether I should cause suffering to his new home, and I found that tiny tears were falling from the pages bereft of their newly found companion. I knew that my happiness would not be complete if I took him away.

Thereupon I suggested that I should be much better pleased if the bookmark could remain in his rightful place, and that I could be allowed to visit him when I wished.

My remarks were hailed with many shouts of delight around me, and I turned to see a small company of books gathered, who welcomed my decision with loud rustlings of their pages until I became embarrassed with the demonstration.

The bookmark turned to me with a smile as he replaced himself in between the pages which awaited his coming, saying tenderly, " It is better to have pleasure without sin, for a sinful pleasure is bitter."

As the dawn broke I made my way happily to my place, and as I passed the many books I saw that they regarded me with kindly looks, knowing that I had come through an ordeal of youth unscathed by the worldly thoughts which had tempted me, and I knew that I had conquered their hearts.

I, just many pieces of paper with printed words upon them, rejoiced to know that my master had written nothing within me that would sear the soul of any reader, and that the thoughts which I expressed would bear me up against any temptations which might beset me.

My heart had nearly governed my head, but I had learned a lesson which remained with me

through life, and though I felt solitary during the day, the untainted pleasure which I enjoyed in the company of my two friends at night became more enjoyable because of this.

I had nevertheless only been pursuing a course born of my desire for knowledge—a worthy youthful need—which sometimes leads us over many stony paths, yet the end of the journey had yielded me greater pleasure than if my road had been made plain.

CHAPTER VII

DURING one of my nightly jaunts I remember meeting with two books who were exactly the same to all outward appearance. Their attitude towards me was as if I had been a candle and they moths, and I could not have avoided them even had I wished to do so.

Their title accounted for this, for it was "Captures," by John Galsworthy, and I had been trapped between them.

My curiosity was aroused, for surely, I thought, it is unnecessary to have two of a kind in a collection, and I expressed my thoughts to them.

They sniggered at my words, while one of the volumes, who had an air of superiority about him, which I now noticed gave him a higher toned voice, said generously, "First appearances are often deceptive where books are concerned, and although we seem the same from without, young man, I am very different from my brother—see!"

Thereupon he opened his covers and showed me his front end paper, but I could notice nothing remarkable. Thereupon his brother spread out his covers and I saw that he had an end paper missing.

This was evidently an imperfection of no particular account, and I was not impressed by the evident pride of the superior brother, who, catching a look of apparent scorn upon my face, said, "You

think that my brother is imperfect, perhaps, but it is not so, though he has had a page torn from him, he is virtually as his publisher produced him."

I became interested though still unimpressed. I said, "Why have you an end paper with a list of books upon it, and your unfortunate brother has lost his?"

"Ah," he replied knowingly, "that is the secret. We were all printed with the same end papers, but upon publication our author objected to the discovery that he made of the existence of this end paper containing a list of books by other authors. All the copies were stripped of this page, excepting a very few, among whom I was one, whilst my brother was unfortunate."

"Then," I replied, "you are a rarity?"

"I am," he answered proudly, "for there are not more than a couple of dozen of us, and our value is enhanced quite four times by reason of this—though my brother here is worth twelve shillings at least."

I thanked him for his interesting information and stored the knowledge for future use, continuing my course around the shelf.

My eyes were next attracted to a very slim volume with a highly coloured covering of paper instead of the customary cloth, and I wondered if even he would consider himself of value.

His title, "The Court of the Printers' Guild," was a strange one, and his published price was one shilling.

He had a fascinating air, for the figures of grotesque yet beautifully fantastic men disported themselves boldly upon his front page.

His attractiveness compelled a closer acquaintance as the illustrator's creations seemed to beckon me towards them, and I asked the pamphlet (he was little more) for some particulars about himself.

He told me that his chief virtues were the groups of coloured drawings by Claude Lovat Fraser, and that he was a desirable acquisition for collectors of his creator's art.

I certainly thought that collectors would find great pleasure in such a treasure. I asked him if he was of any great value.

"Monetary value, I suppose you mean?" he asked. "This is of no great importance to me, though I am worth at least fifteen times my original price. My true worth is due to the fact that, as all virtuous productions should do, I keep within me the art of my craftsman—this is far more important than my value in mere coin."

Certainly a book with an ideal outlook, and I did not find fault with his remarks, which were uttered in kindly tones.

Many happy reminiscences come to me of the pleasant hours which I spent in my first home, and the knowledge which I gained of the wealth of books has remained with me.

I wish to write of happy things, but my story would be incomplete if I omitted to tell of the disaster which soon befel me, and if I speak of it with sadness I know that you bear with me. To

lose the company of friendly books is a misfortune which only true book lovers can understand.

When naught but sepulchral shadows of vanished volumes live in the spaces wherein once dwelt the loved companions of many hours, then does the heart feel heavy. . . .

We books are ever ready to comfort and to cheer all human beings, if they will but search among us for one of our kind to suit their mood, and we reveal ourselves to be staunch friends and worthy advisers.

What more can a man wish for than a library of us, always at hand to serve him. Our vagaries are certainly more easily managed than those of many men, for if we do not please, we may be put back into our place.

Unselfish, inasmuch as we never ask for more than that we be treated with care, and in return we make ample repayment for such consideration.

We help you to forget the troubles that beset you in your world. We are made with the labour of your hands, surely a sufficient cause for us to be anxious to show you the worthiness of our existence.

You buy us with coin, but it is with labour that you pay for us, and because of that we are ready to serve you—if you use us badly, 'tis your own labour which you destroy.

I had been read by my sweet mistress, but her husband had neglected me so that I became despondent, thinking that my work had finished and that I should remain in the obscurity of the

shelves, until I should be forgotten. Often he had visited us, but to my sorrow he had always ignored my dumb invitation to take me into his hands.

One evening, in late November, the light in the library was suddenly switched on, and my master and the beautiful lady entered, and coming across to the bookcase, opened the doors.

They began to search the shelves, while a chorus of small voices called impatiently to them, "Take me! Take me!" until an ominous remark from the lips of master caused a hush to fall upon us.

"We must only sell those books which we feel we can actually spare," he said.

Many books then attempted to hide themselves behind others, but their efforts were of no avail, for soon a number were laid upon the table bemoaning their misfortune. I felt secure, for I had not been read by our master, but I grew sad as I watched numbers of my old friends being removed from the shelves.

Presently mistress saw me, and taking me in her hands said, "Why Jack, here is John Scribes's 'The Seeker,' and I don't believe that you have even read it!"

"I haven't had the time, dear, and I'm sure I shall not now find an opportunity, with so many other important things to think about—so you had better put it with the others."

Reluctantly she obeyed, but said, "I believe you would really have liked to read it, Jack, and that you are robbing yourself of a great pleasure."

"No, Mabel, I'm afraid that Scribes's stuff is a

little too much for me in my present frame of mind, so I will let it go."

The room swam around me as I heard myself called "stuff," and it was not until I again found myself in my mistress's hands that I was able to collect my thoughts.

She lifted me on to a small pile on her left and I tried to caress her hand, believing that she would recognise the appeal in my touch, but my attempts were unnoticed.

Her face wore a troubled look and I heard her say sadly, "Oh, I do wish that we had not found it necessary to part with so many, dear."

"Yes, it is a pity," he replied, "but needs must when the devil drives, you know, and our little one is going to cost us a pile of money."

I wondered what hand the devil had in our movements. I knew that devils were wicked folk who sometimes annoy humans, but I did not think that they ever troubled themselves about books.

His allusion to "the little one" caused me to ponder over the meaning of his words, and I questioned my nearest companion, an encyclopædia.

He told me that they spoke about a baby, and that all had to be little at first, not being made by machinery in the same way that the majority of books are made. Of course, I know all about that now, but it seemed strange to me then, that books—which sometimes get cut down in their old age, should be so different.

My companion remarked that he thought that we were all to be sold in order to pay for the

"little one" which would cost a deal of money to buy.

The encyclopædia was a veritable mine of information, and seemed too valuable to be sold, though perhaps he had not much soul. Such books are too varied, but he was certainly a fine fat book, even if he did not have any individuality.

Unfortunately his information proved to be very true, for early upon the following morning an elderly man was shown into our presence.

His expression showed a kindly nature; a shrewd sense of ascertaining the worthiness of anything which came beneath his notice, and he at once began to examine us, in a rather nonchalant manner, and though the expression of his eyes was hidden by glasses, I imagined that he felt pleased with us.

Eventually he finished his examination and turned to my master, saying, "How much do you want for them?" His voice dropped a note of disappointment, which was not lost upon my master, who replied slowly and with evident sorrow, "I thought about a hundred pounds."

"A hundred?" said the stranger, picking up his hat as if to depart. "Why I couldn't give you anything like *that*. It is far too much to ask."

"Well, then—you had better make me an offer for them."

The dealer pondered a few seconds and then replied in a decisive manner, "I'll give you fifty for them—and I can't offer another shilling."

"No," said my master, "I will not let them go for that, for they are a very fine collection and have cost me a considerable sum. Look at this—and this—and this," he added, rapidly picking out a volume here and there.

"Yes, those are all right, but many of them are bad sellers just now, and, of course, I must take the good with the bad—but I'll make it sixty or leave 'em alone."

My master stood silently considering the offer, and then, evidently pleased that he had at least advanced the price ten pounds, he said quietly, "Right, you can have them."

The stranger then drew out from his pocket a long narrow book in which he hurriedly wrote a few words, and to my surprise immediately mutilated the book by tearing out a whole sheet!

This was the first time that I had seen with my own eyes such a despicable act committed, and I felt grieved that it should be done by a book dealer of all people.

I wondered how I should feel if I had experienced the same sensation, apart from the fact that my value would be immediately lost, so I turned to the encyclopædia again in my rage.

He was greatly amused at my discomfiture and explained with a laugh that it was a "cheque" book, made to be mutilated in that way. "It does not hurt the cheque book at all," he said, "for its pages are perforated for that purpose, but the owner of a cheque book often suffers a great deal more. . . ."

He added that one page from the cheque book

was sufficient to pay for all of us, and I thought then that surely this must be the King of Books.

* * * * *

Soon we were left alone again for a few minutes, but the dealer returned accompanied by another man, who assisted him to pack us into square baskets and carried us out of the house.

After a short swift journey—at a faster pace than a respectable book cares to travel—we were taken into a shop crammed with many other books. These were comfortably housed in tall bookcases around the walls, and I noticed that many of them had glass fronts to them, which is a great blessing to books, for it keeps them free from dust. . . .

Dust gets between our leaves and causes us to look soiled and feel uncomfortable, though a regular brushing down is a great relief. It rids us of tiny specks which would otherwise penetrate unnoticed between our pages.

If dust is allowed to accumulate upon the tops of our pages, it falls into us when we are opened and remains, steadily eating its way into our hearts, destroying our appearance, and lessening our values.

* * * * *

While my new master proceeded to unpack us, I interested myself in studying his face, so that I could form an opinion of the type of man he was.

That he knew and understood books thoroughly was at once evident, for there is a bond of sympathy existing between us and those who love us, and a book knows when he is in the hands of a "book master." In the hands of this man we knew that

we should be kindly treated, though subjected to a discipline which would prove beneficial, especially to any wayward books. A book dealer is a veritable book master, and his stock is there to attend to his commands, and a wise book knows that it is for his benefit if he would wish to eventually better his position in life.

We were all eager to pass through this great man's hands, and over-anxiety caused some of us to become restless. This nearly caused a catastrophe for a pile of books began to fall forward, but were cleverly saved from crashing to the ground by the alertness of the book master, who laid us in safer formation.

I think that the man's eyes appealed to me more than anything else, for they held an expression which told me that a glance was sufficient to assess the worth of us, as he examined us rapidly.

He had, no doubt, seen many literary treasures and had absorbed into his soul the many mature reflections of great masters of literature.

Perhaps this was why I felt that when I lay in his hands for a few brief seconds, I was being assessed at my true value to the world as a contribution to its literature, and not solely on account of my monetary value.

I felt pleased to sense through the touch of his hands his appreciation, and, as he laid me down upon the pile at his side, his hand rested for a fraction of a second on my covers, kissing me with a light caress.

One can never account for the fact that certain

seemingly trivial happenings in our lives persist in our memories, but those few seconds live in my mind perhaps more vividly than the first kiss between a lover and his lass, and though I feel that I may have spoken of this matter a little sentimentally, I desire to describe my impressions as faithfully as I recollect them.

Eventually we were all set upon the shelves which surrounded the shop, and fortunately I could see a little of the passing life of London through the windows, and I could watch the entry of any customer.

Another passage in my life had commenced, the daylight began to fade, and glimmering lights illumined the shops of the little court outside, until later in the evening the book master and his assistants left us to the enjoyment of our own company.

CHAPTER VIII

The rows of books resting upon the shelves of the old bookshop provided me with many pleasant hours of soliloquy, and as I gazed around at the vast assembly of immortal volumes I knew happiness.

Here were the best things of earth's culture past and present. The writers of many of my companions had long since passed into a world away. But their works remained dormant, though ready at all times to expose their souls to the man who would know them.

Yes! Though of all earthly possessions we are the most desirable, yet the breath of heaven is within our pages. The soul of man has nurtured us, the labours of a life may be within us; but long after the hand of the master has become stilled we remain to immortalise the words which he entrusted to our care, to benefit whoever would share his knowledge and his gifts.

Of all the world's workers the author is surely the most unselfish—seeking only that he may give, conferring pleasure with an honest mind and often receiving less than his true proportion of wealth.

'Tis this which makes all books the unselfish servants of men, and if in return they receive an understanding care, they are ready to serve again and again.

That the leaders of thought of the British nation

have long realised this is evinced by the fact that a copy of every book that is published is by law sent to the British Museum. Surely the nearest approach to heaven in the whole world—a paradise where the souls of men are enshrined in many bindings.

I tried to think of the influence which these books around me had upon the world, and I thought that even the comparatively small collection within the shop contained more wisdom of far-reaching effect than could be seen at a glance by any human eye in search of a better treasure.

Should a man need a mental stimulant, then a book can provide it. If amusement, knowledge, thrills or the telling of the loves of others be his desire, one at least from among us would be ready to serve him.

For any mood or for any life, there is a book awaiting to be called, and therein lies the wonderful power of influence which books radiate from their pages. No servant other than a book could ever be so ready to come to your aid.

* * * * *

As I soliloquised in that hallowed atmosphere it was not to be wondered that I felt impressed by the grandeur of the scene, and in the companionship of books I knew that I should ever find happiness and contentment.

During my frequent adventures I met with volumes whose words and actions were difficult to construe, but I realised that life consisted of a variety of these twain, and that it is a natural

advantage that books should be diverse, for therein lies a secret of their attractiveness.

I had become lost in my reveries and few noises penetrated from without to disturb the trend of my thoughts. The footsteps of passers-by were less frequent and the sounds of the great city were falling away as the night deepened, though occasionally the mellow-toned chimes from a nearby clock fell sonorously upon the air.

London was beginning to sleep and the first freedom hours in my new home were fast approaching ; I desired to roam among my new acquaintances in this vast wonderland of wisdom.

The rustling of many pages soon betokened that the hour of midnight had arrived. It was as if a soft wind passed along the shelves, kissing the volumes into activity, and imparting to them the power to move. I have wondered if this could be the greeting breaths of the souls of great writers. . . .

Though many of my old acquaintances were at hand I determined to seek my enjoyment among the older inhabitants of the shop, and if I fail to do justice to my reminiscences of the wonderful evenings spent in their company, I must have a better memory than powers of expression.

Perhaps it was because I needed a literary relaxation that night that not mere coincidence alone led me to a volume named " The Professor," whose author had shown modesty by omitting his name from the covers of the venerable-looking book.

" The Professor " had evidently sensed my

interest, and introduced himself to me, saying, "You would like to talk with me?" in an affable and affectionate voice.

I replied with courtesy that it would give me very great pleasure. Thereupon he took me with him into a quiet corner and began to address me in the manner of a lecturer having before him a vast and interested audience, though his delivery was decidedly modest.

"The subject of my talk to-night," he began, "is one which I know will appeal to you. I am aware of your book-hunting propensities and your praiseworthy endeavours to attain knowledge of the wonderful world in which we live. I wish, therefore, to aid you by giving you information which you would not otherwise be able to obtain so easily.

"Now you know, of course, that most of the books around us are first editions. It may be something to cause you wonder when I tell you that the hobby of book collecting is a very old one, though the collecting of first editions has become more popular during the past years.

"I propose, therefore, to confine myself to telling you something about this pleasant hobby of 'First Edition Collecting,' in order that you may choose your companions without fear of making many bad friends.

"Let me presume, for the purpose of my talk to-night, that you are a man with a desire for collecting these books and that you have only a very little knowledge of values and so on.

" The first question which you would ask is, ' What shall I collect ? '

" This requires a decision dependent upon your own wishes and your own tastes. It would be absurd for me to suggest that you should collect, say, Rudyard Kipling, if you do not appreciate his style—though on the other hand if you aim at collecting in order to make it profitable I should advise you to place Kipling upon your list of ' collectable ' authors.

" It has been said that no true collector will dispose of anything from his collection, but I disagree, considering that it is selfish and unnatural. The inexperienced collector or the less wealthy collector may at times be forced to dispose of a specimen because of a mistake made or the need for money to enable him to afford a more desirable treasure.

" I, therefore, consider that it is essential to make something like a definite selection from the authors whose works are collected and who, at the same time, appeal to you, without losing sight of the possibilities of enhanced values in the years to come.

" The economical side of collecting is naturally of the utmost importance to one with small means, and if a library of valuable books is the objective it is necessary for the collector to be wise in his choice, so that upon a future occasion he can dispose of any surplus items at a profitable price.

" The mere collecting of books because of their speculative value draws the line between two classes of collectors—he who has an innate love for books,

and he who thinks of books only as a commodity and who does not enter into the purpose of my talk.

"Let me say here and now that a collected author of the present day may, in a year or two, be forgotten, and naturally the collector of first editions will not wish to have upon his shelves items which are worthless relics of past glories.

"On the other hand there are authors who, besides providing some of the best reading matter of the age, will increase in popularity and whose first editions will improve in value. It is to these that I advise collectors to turn their attentions.

"I believe I can safely say that you will be well advised if you choose from the following authors, and you can meet with many of their works in the shelves which surround us."

This benevolent, but ever youthful-looking, old book paused for a few seconds, and then to my surprise and amusement, began to execute a jogging dance around me, humming a tune which seemed to suit his steps so well that I became fascinated immediately. Presently he broke into full song, while continuing his dance, with the words of a verse which ran as follows:—

"There's Conrad and Kipling, James Stephens and
Moore,
Hudson and Masefield—a little of Shaw!
Sheila Kaye Smith and the great R. L. S.,
And last but not least—the author of 'Tess.'"

I wondered why he sang "a little of Shaw," for

I thought that the literary world had almost as great opinion of this master's creativeness as he has of himself, but I presume that it was just put that way to make a convenient rhyme. Yet I believe that this rhyme would please those people who have been heard to remark that we have "too much Shaw." Certainly "Back to Methuselah" was voluminous and rather terrific, but it cannot be said that we have had too much "Saint Joan" —a masterpiece which has even pleased the critics!

"Yes," continued the "Professor" knowingly, "I think that you will be able to remember with the help of my little rhyme the names of ten of the best, but it does not exhaust the list, for you will find goodly folk amongst the books by the following authors."

A repetition of the same dance followed and the old book sang:—

"James Barrie and Chesterton—minus the joke—
With Huxley and Machen together we'll yoke.
Plus William McFee with his tales of the sea,
Complete me this verse with Yeats—W. B."

I applauded him for this happy rendering and wondered whether he had composed these verses extempore. I think that it is sometimes a habit with lecturers to give the impression that they are clever in this manner, when they have prepared with many hours of labour their most clever deliveries.

However, my companion seemed to appreciate my applause and expressed his satisfaction.

"Those two verses," he continued, "contain perhaps enough for the purposes of our present talk, and a complete collection of the works of those named would be a somewhat formidable and expensive task. Many of them have written extensively and others are rapidly increasing in popularity. For instance, the clever William McFee has earned laurels in many reviews and has even been described as the new Conrad, but I do not think that he will fill that vacant throne.

"Conrad, although not a 'popular' author, has enshrined himself in the hearts of his readers by the strength of his writings. Deep, deep down into the depths of the sea he loved, salt with the tang of it, embittered with the sting of it, he wrote of the sea as he knew it, and the master hand imparted it into every word he wrote—and none but a master could have done that.

"Rudyard Kipling with his multitude of writings even now presents a problem which to the inexperienced seems to be almost insuperable, but a collection of this author's works may be started with several inexpensive items. Many indeed may still be found in bookshops, where they have remained unsold since the day of publication!

"The next step to be taken by the collector, after he has decided upon his authors, is to obtain good bibliographies of their works, and a study of the catalogues of the second-hand booksellers will assist him in arriving at average values.

"With modern collected authors who are still producing, it is well that their latest works should

be purchased as published, for frequently it happens that first editions are soon exhausted and the scarcity causes the price to rise, and at times a high premium is asked a short time after publication.

"For the new collector, it is therefore advisable that he should reverse the order of things and start at the end, buying the last book first and gradually working backwards until he discovers a reasonably priced copy of the first book of his favoured author to complete the set.

"He should be careful to purchase only copies in fine condition and in original bindings, for often a first edition loses nearly all of its value when it has been re-bound.

"Yes, even though the binding be an expensive leather, the value may be reduced below that of a copy in the original cloth."

These remarks caused me to voice my surprise, but the "Professor" did not seem to hear, and I could see that he was so absorbed in the subject in hand that, being undesirous of interrupting, I remained silent and attentive as he continued.

"Other pitfalls beset the path of the collector, and it is necessary that he should learn whether the book that he is buying is a true first *issue*, for it sometimes happens that a first edition has two or more issues.

"A slight alteration in the text or the format or the correcting of a misprint or a complete change of binding may be made hurriedly after some copies have been dispatched to the bookshops. Then, if the book is of importance, a demand is at once in

vogue for the copies of the scarce first issue of the first edition."

(Of course, I had already been informed of this fact during my wanderings in my former home, but I did not expect the lecturer to talk to me for such a lengthy period without telling me *something* which I already knew.)

"Providing a collector deals with a man who is trustworthy he will have no cause to fear that he will be imposed upon by having wrong copies foisted upon him. Most booksellers are good fellows, in love with their work, and though loth to give away the secrets of their trade, they will not knowingly sell a worthy customer a bad bargain.

"A housewife would not deal from a grocer who sold to her bad eggs, or cheese which was 'not right,' and I cannot think that any bookseller would sink to the level of a bad grocer!

"The collecting of first editions has many branches, and enthusiastic followers of one or other of these find many temptations in the published lists of desirable treasures which frequently come from the second-hand bookshops.

"Many books are collected because of the illustrative work which they contain, and an artist may be the most important co-operator in the production, but it is often because the charm of the artist's work suits exactly the daintiness or attractiveness of the author's word pictures.

"The many delightful contributions to books by the famous Hugh Thomson please the eye of

most connoisseurs, and among the books which he illustrated are 'Pride and Prejudice,' by Jane Austen; Austen Dobson's 'Coridon's Song'; Goldsmith's 'The Vicar of Wakefield,' and a great many other books which have been given an added charm by the simplicity and lightness of the touch of the artist.

"I must mention to you also the names of Aubrey Beardsley, Joseph Pennell, Arthur Rackham, James McNeil Whistler and the dashing Max Beerbohm. They have added lustre to many books because they give a volume a distinctiveness which it would perhaps otherwise have lacked, and such books have a great appeal to collectors.

"The works of Lovat Fraser have a charm of their very own, being so full of colour that one is tempted to compare them with the contents of a paint-box, but the fantastically arranged gems cannot fail to please the majority of lovers of 'bookish' art.

"Now I will leave the books which are collected because of the worthiness of their authors or of their illustrators. Collectors can still find another outlet for their enthusiasm amongst modern productions. I refer to the increasing number of finely printed editions which are being produced at comparatively reasonable prices from the publishing houses.

"These examples of the best workmanship have an appeal to many because they are often produced in such limited numbers that they are, of course, comparatively scarce.

"They are designated under the name of 'Editions de Luxe,' 'Large Paper Copies,' or 'Limited Editions,' and are often signed by their authors and bound in a superior style which gives them a distinctiveness and a charm which makes them worthy possessions.

"It is pleasant to know that in this rushing world of commercialism there are idealists among publishers who put aside handicapping objections and aim to produce books up to a standard of excellence which will give to our literary nation a place of honour among the producers of fine books.

"The habit of signing books has, I am afraid, become a very common practice, and efforts have been made to impress the public with a false sense of the importance of an author by one or more of these special editions of his works, when the author is undeserving of such honour. This is unscrupulous, for no author should be admitted into the circle of the 'Editions de Luxes' ere his literary standing has been established.

"The published prices of these books in special editions varies in accordance with the costliness of the production and may be from one to twenty pounds—a price which makes them desirable but impossible acquisitions to many, though a good book is a very good temptation.

"I have yet to deal with another example of the efforts of the present-day book producers to cope with the demand for finely made books, and the craftsmanship of the many private presses

have found their outlet in many delightful works.

"Among these I must mention the nicely named 'Doves Press,' which operated from 1900 to 1916 and produced fine editions of over fifty works within this period, all of which are of a distinctive type and of substantial value.

"The wonderful work of the idealist, William Morris, is immortalised in the productions which emanated from the Kelmscott Press which he founded. Some of the scarcest volumes, printed throughout upon vellum, have been sold for several hundred pounds. Specimens from this press can, however, be obtained by the collector from two pounds and upwards, and being things of beauty, can be safely speculated upon, for they make worthy additions to the attractiveness of a library."

The old book began to look tired, and I knew that he was at last finding a difficulty in breathing, and I was relieved for his sake when he said after a pause, "I must now bring my talk, for this night, to a close, trusting that you have profited by the ideas that I have given you of the desirable items to be found in the productions of our age, that you may be able to judge for yourself as you wander through life the worthiness of the volumes which cross your path.

"Another evening I will talk to you of some other matters which will, I believe, both please you and instruct you.

"You may have a desire to ask me questions,

and I shall be pleased to give you an opportunity when next we meet. Good night, friend 'Seeker.'"

I bade him farewell and watched him thread his way through the crowded shelves; then I too turned and wandered back to my place to rest and think over the facts which I had heard, so that I could commit them to memory.

CHAPTER IX

The neighbouring church clock had just rung out the hour of nine when the door of the shop was opened to admit the book master and his assistants. With a quick glance around the shop, the little man disappeared up the flight of stairs at the back of the shop, whilst his two assistants busied themselves tidying any of the volumes which had become out of place during the night's ramblings.

Each book was dusted, and I had every speck of dirt removed from the tops of my pages; then replaced in the case among books of my own size —happily on to the same shelf again.

The shop presented a very attractive appearance and the polished woodwork of the glass-fronted cases reflected the daylight, which gave an added appearance of cleanliness to the books within.

Presently a shabbily dressed young man entered through the doorway carrying in his hands a parcel, which he laid upon the counter.

Fortunately the door of my bookcase had been left slightly open; I was able therefore to hear the conversation which ensued.

I thought at the time that the open door was a sign of forgetfulness. I learned later, however, that it was intentional, because air assists to preserve the freshness of good bindings.

* * * * *

The book master now made his appearance in

response to the call of the youngest assistant and approached the young man.

I thought that he looked sorrowful, yet the expression of his eyes spoke of deep thought and study.

"You wanted to see me?" queried my master.

"Yes, sir, I have some books which I have to sell. I would be glad if you could let me know if they interest you, please."

"Certainly—what do you want for them?" asked my master, as he took the parcel and began to glance through the contents, whilst the young man remained silent until they had all been inspected. Again the book master repeated his question in a somewhat disparaging tone, which made the young man hesitate to reply.

At length he said a little tremulously, "I want a pound for them, sir."

"A pound! Why, I shall not be able to get much more than that for them myself. I can't give you that amount, young man."

"Well, then, how much will you pay me for them, sir? I'm afraid I must sell them—as—as it's necessary that I should have money."

Something in the tone in which these words were uttered caused my master to look quickly at the figure before him, whose salesmanship was stamped with the touch of the amateur.

Again he looked at the books, then raised his eyes once more and asked kindly, "What is the necessity—I should like you to tell me, if you will?"

The answer came slowly but eagerly. "I wish to raise some money to assist my wife, sir. She has been ill, and has been ordered to take a complete rest."

"I see," said my master, "and so you fly to your books in your trouble—eh?"

"I shall be sorry to part with them, sir—indeed I shall, and that is why I do not want to let them go too cheaply—if *you* think that they are useful to you."

"Yes, I *can* use them, but I can't give you what you ask. Why, this one here is worth much more than twenty shillings alone! I'm going to give you *thirty* shillings for them, because I too have known adversity, and I guess your troubles. Will thirty shillings suit you, young man?"

"It will indeed, sir—though I cannot believe that you mean it—I thought that book dealers were all alike, and never gave more than they had to for anything."

"Ah, well, you have made a reasonable mistake. But I happened to know that you were coming to see me this morning; I knew all about your trouble—don't ask me how—and here is the money—take it and go along home—don't stop to ask me any questions—good-bye!"

Without another word my master turned upon his heel and disappeared upstairs, whistling joyfully.

The young man's face trembled with emotion, and I thought that he would have rushed after the book master. Instead he turned towards the lady assistant and said tremulously, "Please thank

him for me—will you? He did not give me the chance. Tell him that I wanted to thank him—so much."

"That is all right," she replied. "It's just his way. I don't think that he would like you to thank him. Good morning."

With a glance in the direction of the stairs the young man turned and left the shop to join the passing world of men hastening upon their daily round in search of wealth and happiness.

His upright figure had hardly been lost to view when the bent form of the book master descended the stairs. A happy face leant over the banister, then vanished, leaving behind a veritable trail of honest chucklings which seemed to bubble down the stairs and to roll around the shop with ever-loudening echoes until the books all danced with the joy which permeated them.

Through the window of the shop a golden gleam of sunshine threaded its way and came to rest upon the floor just where this happy transaction had taken place, and the dancing light reflected itself upon the whole company of books.

* * * * *

The next visitor that morning was a well-dressed elderly gentleman of smart appearance who signalised his presence with a loud cough, and proceeded to remove from his right hand a yellow glove.

Evidently our master had been expecting this visitor, for he appeared at the bottom of the short

flight of stairs, and approaching his visitor, said cheerily, "Good *morning*, Sir Henry."

"Good morning, Mr. Goodman. You are looking well, I see."

"I am well, I thank you, Sir Henry. You too are looking fit, so that I have no need to ask *you* the state of your health."

"I'm feeling fine—just come back from the Riviera—and after the sunshine I think that the next thing to please me is a visit to you—and an inspection of your new treasures."

"Yes," said the book master, with a smile, "and I believe that I can tempt you with some very desirable volumes, which you have wished to acquire."

The tall knight accompanied my master up the stairs, and their figures contrasted strangely—but I knew that the tourney would centre around the treasure trove of books, and that my master would win the day.

I believed that payment with interest was due to Mr. Goodman for his kindly act of the morning. If the worthy knight should happen to be one of those valuable assets to successful trading who would pay well for a good thing, I knew that his visit would be advantageous to the old man.

Later the two men returned into the shop, and the customer walked to the door, followed by the dealer. "Yes, I think," he said, with his hand resting upon the handle, "that I shall be very pleased with the books. A lot of money! But

rarities are worthy of a good price at any time. Good day, Mr. Goodman, good day."

My master bowed him out, and I sensed that he had won a good victory, for a tell-tale smile lit his features and a sunbeam made a golden path across his way. . . . I felt very happy. . . .

* * * * *

Day dreams and the pleasing company around me soon began to make the hours pass rapidly; I rested content upon the shelf of my bookcase, in sympathetic harmony with the companionship of the books and the world in which I dwelt.

CHAPTER X

At eventide upon the same day the bookshop was closed, and the book master and his two assistants adopted the same procedure as on the previous night; ending with a final glance around the shelves by the old man.

I had determined that I should again meet the "Professor" at the earliest moment; I wished to question him upon some of the points in his previous lecture.

Outside in the narrow court, a cold and chilly dampness had begun to settle; the fitful gleams of the November day had given place to a deepening vapour.

Uncertain forms loomed gloomily through the mist and I could hear their spectral coughing as they passed the windows. The sounds of the town were blanketed with the covering of the lengthened night.

Such an evening was a fitting prelude to the long and undisturbed night's enjoyment to which I was happily looking forward, and the warmth of the learned book's discourse would soon dispel the gloom which even endeavoured to penetrate into the deepest recesses of the shop.

This was a real book-lover's night. I could imagine the joy with which a man would settle himself down in the deepest armchair which he could find, and drawing it into the warming glow

of the fire, leave the world to grope its way homeward through the fog.

Drawn curtains, a cosy chair, a friendly fire and a book! The book-lover's Utopia—and the stage is set for many scenes which will carry him away in imagination to lands wherein dwell the desires of his fancy.

Along the turbid waterways which thread the jungle sands, or over the pack ice with intrepid explorers, he may journey on nights like these.

The songs of summer or the breath of spring can be extracted at will from the pages of a book should he choose to please his fancy with such delights.

He may read the biographies of great men who have travelled through the uncharted paths of life, meeting with sadness and disappointment; ever inspiring the reader with the fire of determination which only can lead us to the journey's end—marked with the scars of life's battle, but wearing the crown of the victor.

The book-lover can breathe with quiet sympathy the thoughts that moved the sorrowing figure of Tom Brown as he stood in the College chapel—close to the side of his departed master. Tom Brown can be found always at hand to please or to inspire.

Dear old Pickwick can create many a chuckle if the book-lover desires him, or he can be sad with Thomas Hardy's immortal masterpiece, "Tess of the d'Urbervilles."

He can drink of the writings of the great minds

of the philosophers or drown himself in a welter of blood flowing from the pages of the modern mystery novel.

All these and many other types of books await the call of the book-lover to dispel the gloom of the world, or to act in sympathy with any human mood. I have often thought that a book-shop is not unlike a combination of a doctor's consulting room and dispensary.

Of the two I believe I prefer the book-shop as being more beneficial to mankind; certainly the medicine is much cheaper and pleasanter.

With such material for the enrichment of the mind to be had in many cases at prices less than the average cost of a box of patent pills, I marvel at this great nation's nature. I believe that many more boxes of pills are purchased than volumes of books. I have heard that pill-makers leave wealth behind them, but booksellers only empty cheque-books.

In some homes it would be considered to be a sign of bad breeding if the medicine chest was not kept well stocked, but an empty bookcase is looked upon with equanimity—indeed, I have heard of cases where it has been transformed into a medicine chest.

My nature leads me to soliloquise, and in reflection I find pleasant entertainment to give me companionship in my lonely hours. Thus the evening passed pleasantly until the first stroke of the freedom hours was released upon the dull air and we became free to wander among our fellows.

I hastened across to the "Professor," who greeted me affably but with an expression in his eyes which spoke of thoughts dwelling far away, and after a short pause he said, "Let me see, I believe that I finished my talk last night with a few words respecting the productions of the private presses."

"Yes," I replied; "but before you begin I should be glad if you will answer a few questions for me."

"Questions! Questions! Certainly—but after my lecture, friend 'Seeker'—that is the time for questions," he replied rapidly with a slight trace of annoyance.

I felt rebuked and left him to pursue his own course, for I did not wish to give him any possible excuse for becoming out of temper with me.

He commenced to speak in the same learned and direct method of delivery as upon the previous evening.

"Now a little more may be said respecting the modern press publications, for apart from the privately owned presses there are a number of publications which emanate from various 'presses' which are worthy of our attention.

"They issue in various forms admirable specimens of modern craftsmanship for those collectors who desire to possess an edition of a famous work in a fine form.

"In recent years there has sprung into being the 'Nonesuch Press' which, though not a 'private press,' produces a number of reprints of famous

books in a style which has been described as 'a most brilliant achievement in printing and publishing.'

"Perhaps the greatest production from this press was the issue of a fine edition of 'The Holy Bible' in five volumes, including the 'Apocrypha,' at the price of seven guineas. These items, besides being desirable purchases for the modern book collector, are of permanent value.

"Another venture into the world of good book production which deserves our attention is the work of Frederick Etchells and Hugh Macdonald, whose series of 'The Haslewood Books' are a great asset.

"The productions of old woodcuts and the general effect which these books give are only to be attained by a volume which contains the result of a studious supervision and assiduous workmanship allied to a conscientious craftsmanship.

"Among the other productions of the present period I must mention the issues from 'The Golden Cockerel,' 'Hogarth,' 'Beaumont' and 'Cayme' Presses, all of which produce worthy companions for the book-lover.

"We will leave the subject of modern first editions and take a journey through the realms of collectable books issued in the last century; but, of course, I am only able to touch upon a subject which is capable of keeping me talking to you for many nights.

"As before, I will deal with first editions."

Here the delightful old fellow began to dance

around in the same manner as upon the previous night, and sang in his quaint jingle the following verses which I well remember :—

" Dickens and Lever are very good company
To link with Bob Surtees and Trollope—Anthony.
While Meredith, Swinburne and Will Thackeray
Shall live in our memories many a day.

" With Leigh Hunt or Ainsworth you cannot go wrong,
John Keats and George Eliot must live in my song,
Great Shelley and Byron together arise
To whisper the chances of many a prize."

He dwelt a little lingeringly upon the last line, but his method of delivery was so impressive that I have had no difficulty in recalling every word and fluctuation of his voice. I feel that I cannot describe the quaintly executed dance of the old professor.

" Now," said he, after he had regained his breath, " those two little verses contain that which I may describe as the cream of the authors of the last century, and their values, like the standard of excellence of their works, can never fail.

" Of course, there are many others which I can add, but I think that a collector will find among them one or more authors who will provide him with pleasant hours and a life's labour. A considerable amount of money can be spent in obtaining suitable or complete collections of the works of some of them at fair prices.

" You may know that the works of Charles

Dickens, whom we will take as our first author, have run to thousands of editions, and that many first issues of his works are of great value when in the original parts; though some can be purchased at reasonable prices.

"For instance, a set of the complete parts of the first issue of 'Little Dorrit,' in twenty numbers, issued in nineteen parts, may be obtained for a few pounds.

"It is important for a collector of such items to make certain that the issue is correct and perfect. In the case of this particular book the advertisements to the parts—as in the other issues of Charles Dickens's books—must be complete and contain an errata slip in part number sixteen.

"All collectors of the works of Charles Dickens should obtain Eckel's bibliography which, though out of print, is still obtainable at about two pounds, and the information therein will be found to be of the greatest value.

"Owing to the faulty ink used in the printing of the period it is a common occurrence to find that many of the plates by Cruikshank or 'Phiz' have become spotted. It is a comparative blot upon the appearance of a first edition, and a collector will be fortunate to discover any really fine and unblemished sets of Dickens's early works at reasonable prices.

"The first issues of the 'Christmas Books' were issued in red cloth, and here again are many pitfalls for the unwary. For instance, the first issue of the first edition of the 'Battle of Life' has the

publisher's name and the imprint at the foot of the title page and has not the figure of the Cupid, which in later issues was added to the scroll on the engraved title page.

" It is, of course, impossible in the space of these lectures to do more than touch briefly upon these facts, but the collector can satisfy his tastes and guard against disappointing purchases if he will thoroughly study a good bibliography of the author whom he desires to collect.

" In due time he will be well rewarded for the trouble which he takes—if indeed it can be called a trouble—and the joy of discovering for himself a rare book is a very possible and pleasurable remuneration.

" I wish to add a few words upon the other authors whom I mentioned in my last couplet ere I pass on to any other phase of book collecting.

" The works of Charles Lever, though not of great appeal to many collectors, are nevertheless invested with a distinct charm and an added grace by the illustrations which they contain. These were executed by the popular artists of the day, and though some would not agree with me for calling the illustrations of Cruikshank, ' Phiz,' or R. K. Browne graceful, I have always considered them to be gracefully grotesque, which is certainly better than being disgracefully crude in the manner of many modern artists.

" Next, I must say a few words about the immortal Jorrocks, the grocer sportsman, and his creator Robert Smith Surtees. His works are

packed with a wealth of words written in a vernacular which is a platinum setting to the brilliance of the descriptive writings of the one time anonymous author.

"Who can resist the importunate red-coated leader of the ''ounds'? The inimitable Jorrocks has given his creator a following worthy of the place which the works hold in the literature of this country.

"Many editions have been published, and if the collector is unable to afford the pleasure of possessing copies of the genuine first issues, a complete set of which is valued in the neighbourhood of three figures, there is the splendid reissue by Messrs. Bradbury, Agnew and Company which contains the illustrations and woodcuts by John Leech; this can be obtained at reasonable prices.

"Anthony Trollope, my next author, wrote many works which maintain their values, monetary and literary, and this lover of hunting perhaps produced nothing better than his novel 'Barchester Towers,' which, however, can be linked with his equally famous 'The Last Chronicle of Barset,' and a very interesting and illuminating biography of Trollope was written by T. H. S. Escott and published in 1913.

"That sympathetic observer of life, George Meredith, has been neglected by many collectors. There is no doubt that possessors of his first editions can afford to overlook any defects of style that he had, and if one day a first edition of his poems dated 1851 should come your way, complete

with the errata slip, it would be a cause for delight if the sellers should consider Meredith out of date and dispose of the treasure for less than twenty-five pounds.

" My next mechanic of words is Algernon Charles Swinburne. In the span of seventy-two years he turned out a number of highly specialised ballads, poems and plays, which may be bought for a few shillings, though other works from his pen—particularly certain privately printed books—are prized by collectors.

" That strange, sentimental satirist, William Makepeace Thackeray, will always provide collectors with the chance of ample reward in their chase after rarities. Either his writings or his pictures are sufficiently valuable to repay for the labours of searching, and speaking generally, his first editions are desirable acquisitions.

" I feel very kindly disposed to James Henry Leigh Hunt just because he ' never knew his multiplication table ' and called the Prince Regent ' a corpulent Adonis of fifty.' His poetry is not as well known as it deserves to be, though certainly better than a great amount of the much-lauded modern ' masterpieces.'

" The great charm of Leigh Hunt's writings is in his essays, and his narrative verse trips along merrily with a natural lilt. It has been said that after the ' Essays of Elia ' should be read the essays of Leigh Hunt, which is saying more in praise of Hunt than I feel disposed to do.

" Harrison Ainsworth will take us upon many

wanderings through the events which happened in the days of William and Mary, or we may delve into the depths of Windsor Great Forest or live the lives of the unhappy prisoners in the Tower. He who holds a first edition of this author's works in his hands must necessarily feel closer to the heart of the writer who dealt faithfully with the periods which he described in his works.

"In the first editions of seven of his novels we meet again the art of Cruikshank. His literary merit may not reach the high standard set by the authors of his time, yet I think that the story of Dick Turpin and his ride to York, immortalised in 'Rookwood,' is worth the few pounds which is asked for this work.

"I find that I had to place my next collector's target in the second verse, but then I had to do this in order to get a little rhyme into the thing. John Keats holds no second place in the hearts of many lovers of books.

"His sentimental sensuousness and his faithful rendering of many passages are remarkable for the alert and wonderful splendour of his expressions.

"This son of a stable-keeper had a countenance of singular beauty, brimful of the gratitude which dwells upon the sensitive lovers of all nature's gifts. He breathed into his immortal poetry the whisperings of the soul of the world which is only to be reached through the medium of such arts as his.

"If you can live without poetry, you can live

without Keats, but if your collection is to include the best poetry, then the works of this master mind must find a resting-place upon your shelves. He is worthy of your esteem, and though I do not expect that ten pound notes in duplicate, triplicate and multiplicate are to be found in your pockets wherewith to purchase the first editions, an early edition will give great joy.

"The discovery of an uncut copy of a first edition of the 'Endymion' (with its five lines of errata and leaves of advertisements at the end), published in the year 1818, in original boards, would be a reasonable bargain at just a half of one hundred pounds.

"Now I must turn again to novels and to the works of one of the most famous feminines of the last century—Marian Evans, who used the *nom de plume* of 'George Eliot.'

"The great power of her writing showed itself, after many years of laborious toil, in the publication of her first story in 1857.

"Her picturisation of the lives of the English farmers and of the lower middle classes of her time deservedly earn for her a place amongst those authors whose works should be collected and preserved. Though the value of a first edition of 'Scenes from Clerical Life,' dated 1858, is some twenty pounds, there are many less expensive items which can be met with.

"Now come with me, my 'Seeker,' in imagination to the shores of the Lake of Geneva and see the meeting of those two stalwarts of the poetic

art, Percy Bysshe Shelley and George Gordon Byron.

" Sweet and gentle natured Shelley. Angry and despondent Byron! The former an enthusiastic worker in the cause of humanity and the other shamed by those who decried the worldliness of the most vigorous yet egotistical poet of the age.

" Here did Byron consort with a genius whose simplicity and highmindedness acted as a refreshing draught to a jaded and immoral master of the beautiful expression of words. The nobility of Shelley, combined with the quietude of the surrounding country, breathed into the soul of Byron something of the joy of life which had been lost to him as payment extracted by an all-embracing genius; an endowment which exacts its toll, that it may through the agency of man breathe to the world the cry of a soul in torment.

" Alas! the influence of Shelley was withdrawn all too speedily, and the utter recklessness of Byron's temperament earned him a name which has never gilded the lily, whose floral touches of beautifully described scenes and impassioned verse rest with us.

" Later the 'old' Shelley and the very young Byron again met, and in the latter's villa at Venice Shelley composed his wonderful description of the death of a day entitled, 'Lines written among the Euganean Hills.'

" The influence of Shelley upon his friend is one greatly regretted omission from the works of the former, and the world lost, at the early age of

thirty, one who, had he lived, would have taught many lessons of wisdom and nobility which were wasted upon a wonderful but ignoble Byron.

" Shelley was drowned with his friend Williams, and the body of the poet was recovered ten days later. Byron saw the burning of the remains, and so passed he whom nature had loved. Kissed by the caress of the sea and devoured by the flames in the presence of one whom he had tried to save—the passing of a friend—and a grim retribution for the passionate author of ' Childe Harold.'

" The enthusiast may journey far into the realms of collecting in search of treasures from the pens of these two great geniuses. It is a wonderful world, rich in gems of every description, and if a copy of the first edition of ' Queen Mab,' written by Shelley, should meet your eye, having the title page, last leaf and the dedication all intact, then you will know that you possess a worthy relic.

" This book was an attack upon the English Constitution, and Shelley, afraid that the expression of his ideals would meet with a prosecution, removed from nearly all of the copies the title page, dedication and his own imprint. Only two hundred copies were sold, and there are few perfect copies in existence.

" Now, my friend, I have finished my talk, and though you wish to ask me questions, I fear that this must be left until another time, for

daylight is fast approaching and we must away—farewell ! "

" The Professor " hurried away without another word, and I, dwelling upon his eloquence and marvelling at his knowledge, knew that I had much to learn in life. I returned to my place filled with gratification for the lengthy discourse which it had been my privilege to hear.

CHAPTER XI

The old professor welcomed my approach to him upon the following night by an affable waving of his pages, and he at once reminded me of the promise which he made to allow me to ask him some questions.

In anticipation of this, I had employed myself during the day in making mental notes of the kind of questions which I considered most likely to be asked him by anyone of his imaginary audience of would-be book collectors.

We soon found a recess where we could talk undisturbed, and the old book signified his readiness to listen to my inquiries.

"Tell me, sir," I began, "do you consider that the collecting of the first editions of modern authors is likely to prove profitable to a collector?"

He thought for a few moments and then replied, "Providing that he is a book-lover there is no reason for assuming that he should lose anything by it, for the joy which he obtains from his collection is a reward for all time and its value may be estimated in proportion to his love for his collection."

"Yes," I replied, "but I refer more particularly to the collector who buys first editions, reads them, and at a suitable opportunity sells them in order to obtain fresh items which he would not otherwise be able to afford."

"I presume that you are referring to a book collector and not a mere speculator?"

"Yes."

"Then I should say that with care and a wise choice of his authors that it can be said that a good collection can be built up, partly paid for out of the profits of books purchased upon a previous occasion.

"I do not uphold the selling of books by so-called collectors when the only reason is to make money which is not expended upon fresh treasures for the library. These are simply speculators, and unless their experience is well earned they can do but little good to the trade of book selling, and they are unworthy of the name of book collectors.

"Collections of the world's most desirable things are made because of their distinctiveness and their monetary value, and it would be foolish to attempt to eliminate the worth in coin of a collection of books—it would be unnatural.

"To the comparatively poor collector and book-lover I give all my sympathy. Often his treasures are acquired after a long struggle, and if one from his collection can be dispensed with satisfactorily and at a profit, then he may add a fresh treasure to his shelves with a clear conscience.

"That is why I have spoken to you in my talks of the importance of knowing the value and the natures of the books which you may wish to choose for your companions."

I then knew that this old book had wonderful ideals, and a deal of common sense—two things

productive of much happiness—and I asked him my next question.

"What determines a first edition, and why are a certain author's works collected and not another's?"

"These are two questions often asked, and though I do not like to answer two questions at the same time, these are closely allied to each other, and I will therefore deal with them together.

"Naturally the chief reason for the values of first editions is dependent upon the esteem in which the author in question is held by the book-loving public. Their market values are determined by the demand, and a standard of values is thereby set upon them when they come into the salerooms.

"Again, it is natural that any tradesman who finds that an item of his stock is in demand will give it his best attention. In the case of books, the dealer confines his attentions to increasing the price to suit the demand."

"Yes," I replied, "but a grocer does not increase the prices of any brands of sardines because he finds them in demand."

"Quite so. But who can compare sardines with books? A grocer is able to obtain a plentiful supply, but the numbers of first editions are limited and the profits must be made upon existing stocks. A dealer finds that he is often unable to replace a first edition at the price which he paid for it formerly, owing to an increasing demand.

"The demand may be due to one of many causes

which serve to attract attention to the desirability of an author's works.

"Death causes an upward bound in the prices of an author's works and the publicity which he has had denied him during life is given to him when it is too late to benefit him other than by adding glory to the memory of his name. Geniuses have passed from the realities of life and awakened in the world a realisation of their worth, as in the case of the late W. H. Hudson.

"Then another cause for a rise in the value of books may be due to the fact that the author is what may be termed 'a fashionable author'; they receive an undue amount of 'booming' from a kindly disposed Press, are well reviewed, and their first editions are rapidly exhausted; gain a premium, and are collected by certain misled persons who find that in a few months their idols have lost their glamour and, of course, their values.

"Personal discrimination is needed ere a collector embarks upon the path of acquiring first editions of modern authors, and that is why I have said that a book-lover cannot make a loss if his choice is born of a knowledge of the desirability of the author's works."

I then asked him whether it was advisable to purchase first editions in their original bindings in preference to those which had been placed in covers of better material than that in which they had been published.

"Your question leads me to believe that you have not given sufficient thought to it before

speaking," he said, "for it logically follows that in regard to first editions in general it is desirable that they should be in their 'first' state. A collector of furniture would not buy a renovated piece if he could get a specimen which was well preserved. The fact that a book has been re-bound is often due to the desire to preserve the text after the covers have been damaged or soiled, or the edges have become frayed.

"Nevertheless I do not wish you to think that the habit of re-binding a first edition is in any way an undesirable one. On the other hand, it is a work which is deserving of the best support, for collecting and preservation go hand in hand. It is due to the collectors of the past that we are to-day in possession of many rare books which would otherwise have been destroyed or left to moulder away in dark places.

"A modern first edition is preferred in its original binding, but in the case of 'incunabula' or other rare books the preservation of the binding is of less importance."

"Is it an easy matter to tell whether a book is in its original binding?" I asked.

"Only two methods are known to me. One is knowledge and the other is by means of a good bibliography."

"How can one know a first edition from a reprint?"

"My last answer will serve you again," he replied; "but in addition to that it will be useful to you to know that most publishers of to-day add

the words ' reprinted ' to the back of the title page or upon some other page, when the volume is a reprint or a new edition. At other times the date of publication is a sufficient guide, but the honesty of a worthy book dealer like our master is a surety which can have no equal."

" But," I said, " there are book collectors who have not sufficient time to study all the points which are needed to protect them from a faulty purchase. What then would you advise ? "

The old professor leaned towards me and, taking me kindly by the covers, said in a voice brimful of emotion, " My friend, you and I are part of the great and wonderful universe which is ruled over by our worthy book master, and we should not be here, I can assure you, if there was any fault to be found within us. If, as I have presumed throughout my talks with you, you desire to choose your life's companions from the many works of collected authors which are to be met with, I say to you, that in such a shop as this you need have no fear. Our master is typical of many book dealers—worthy men of a worthy calling.

" If you seek for gold in the sewers you will often find dross, and perhaps never any gold, but seek for the beautiful and most desirable of our brothers in this, or a similar temple of literature, and you shall find much that is worthy, ready to your hand.

" Do you know," he continued in a less moved tone, " that a bookshop is considered by many to be a pastureland wherein it is pleasant to browse

and rest awhile? In this 'waiting-room' I have seen people who have become so enamoured to be amongst us for a while that they have forgotten the passage of time!

"Yes, even more than that, my friend. I remember that upon one occasion a book-lover had become so engrossed with our charms that he had to be led out from the shop with a bundle of happy purchases under his arm. He had spent the whole of the day here, forgetting the need for any bodily nourishment whilst seeking his mental joys."

"Then," I said, "book-lovers are somewhat different from other shoppers?"

"Yes, they are, my 'Seeker,' for you must know that the road which is trod by them is full of alluring bypaths. These can tempt the traveller in our midst from the world of reality into pleasanter company than he can find in his own universe.

"Each one of us is essentially different from the other, and can you wonder that book-lovers themselves inherit some of our peculiarities, born of the essences extracted from the many books which they have read?

"The way of the book-lover is not easy, for the more of us he knows the greater becomes his love for us. He evolves from a mere reader into an avaricious being ever seeking and hunting for more comfort and delight in our company, for we are the greatest solaces to be found in this world of selfish humanity."

I began to understand the trend of the professor's conversation and I knew that I listened to a *true* book, who had lived through the vicissitudes of the ages of men, and had gained a knowledge which, unlike that attained by human beings, was not obtained by dearly bought experience. I attempted to anticipate his next remark and asked him if, in his opinion, books were of more importance or more powerful than men themselves.

He paused for a few seconds before replying as if to gather to himself many words of wisdom, and replied in a tone which had become strangely changed, and seemed to emanate from the depths of his pages. " That which lies within all the books that have ever been must be compared with that which rests within the souls of the living world, and who can then say otherwise than that books are indeed more powerful than men? One book alone—the Bible—contains the truth which governs the whole world.

" A man is ignorant at birth, and though through life he may gain much knowledge it would fade with his mouldering body if it were not imparted into the care of a book that all may read of the learnings of his experience. The greatness of a man would be little known if books were unknown. Deeds of valour and renown, acts of mercy and the gifts of the workings of many fertile and ingenious brains are handed down from one generation to another through the power of the book."

I felt proud to learn that I was a member of

such a powerful force in the world, and I fear that my next remark must have given him a hint of my feelings, for he replied, "It must not be thought that every book is worthy to be classed so highly as a power for good, and only those which have been written with the touch of a master hand whose purpose has been guided can be so classed.

"It is to these treasures that all good book-lovers turn, and throughout the ages masterpieces have been written, and will be written, which can be considered worthy of inclusion among the great force of influential books. It is to these great ones and to some of their lesser followers that I recommend you.

"The book-lover and the collector know this which I have told you and have chosen their company with a meritorious discretion. Therein lies the reason why so many of them appear to be creatures of another sphere, for they live in the depths of many printed pages and become insensible to the world around them."

"Do you consider that this is to their advantage?" I asked.

"I know your thoughts, my friend," he said, "and it is this which stays my anger, for I would have you learn from the answers which I have given you, and so I bear with you."

The professor stood in thought for a few seconds and then gave reply to my question with the following words, which came very slowly from his pages: "It must be an advantage for any man to be near

to something which is immortal, for the spirit of man is such, and life holds nothing so near to immortality as the soul's expression upon the pages of a printed book."

With these words the old book moved slowly away, and his moving gave the signal for all of the books to return to their places.

CHAPTER XII

WINTER now held the city in an icy grip and the cold penetrated even into the comparatively warm recesses of the old bookshop, while the hours of daylight grew less and less.

Folks would wander around the shop, glad to escape from the chilled air to the warming company of us all, and on one murky day I was taken down and examined by an old fellow who studied me for some minutes, and then to my dismay placed me upon another shelf.

I cried out to him and endeavoured to attract his attention, but he did not heed my voice, and I found myself among new companions.

My chief cause for regret was the fact that I had become parted from my friend the Professor, but I found consolation in believing that I could have fared worse if I had been purchased by the old man, who was, I knew, shortsighted as well as deaf.

Books are unable to choose their company though they have a great power of influencing human beings towards them or away from them, and it sometimes happens that a book finds itself in unsuitable company.

I remember a story told to me by a little red book of how he had been chosen by an old lady as a birthday present for her nephew who was at college, and was captain of the cricket team.

His aunt had a great admiration for the feats of her adored nephew and sent him "a copy of Charles Dickens's great sporting story, 'The Cricket on the Hearth.'"

The little book told me how he was shown to the young man's friends, who all enjoyed the recounting of the mistake which the kindly disposed old lady had made, but though her nephew suffered a certain amount of disappointment the book itself had real cause to regret the error, for he found himself mixed with a number of uninteresting mathematical books and playing cards. These two types did not agree, and many fierce arguments waged between them, for it appears that the playing cards were for ever upholding their charms of chance and belittling the logical facts with which the mathematical books attempted to justify their existence.

This also reminds me of the story told me by another book who said that he was once given to a commercial traveller who sold "draper's change." His line consisted of packets of pins, needles and cards of buttons, and so on, to be given to customers in lieu of the farthing change.

The traveller, however, did not read even a page of the book, which was entitled "A Traveller in Little Things," by the famous naturalist writer W. H. Hudson.

Other books with whom I have come into contact have told me similar stories of mistaken identity, and one volume which dealt with the Phenomena of Psychical Research said that he was once in the

hands of a soldier who had laboured under the impression that his real title was " Pneumonia and Physical Jerks." The bookseller's assistant, however, rescued my friend from a life which would have been out of keeping with his theories, and the soldier continued his search for a book which he hoped would help him to convince his instructor of the dangers of too much physical exercise.

Another book told me that he had been in the possession of a youth who was an enthusiastic collector of moths and butterflies and who had ordered him under the mistaken impression that he would be of great assistance to him in the pursuit of his hobby. His title was " Hints to Young Mothers " !

After all, it is not to be wondered at that many book titles do mislead people, for books with whom I have mixed have been labelled with very strange names, and I think that the thoughtlessness of the author brings its own poor reward.

A good book may be able to rise above a bad title, but the popularity of a book is often spoiled by the name, though of course the passage of time may cause a book to lose the significance which its title inherited it with upon publication.

Few, if any, of the great writers of books have given their productions any cause for complaint, but I have met with many modern productions that have clumsy and misleading titles.

One poor volume which I met was called " The Soul of a Kettle Drum," and yet another laboured under the hefty alliterative effort of " Deadwood

Dick's Double," or the " Ghost of Gordon Gulch," though I do not think that either of them were the works of geniuses, and of the two I certainly preferred the latter, for his title was descriptive.

The *morale* of a book is easily destroyed by a poor binding. The age of the specially bound " table " books has passed and the scanty cloth covers which are placed upon many modern productions indicates a certain connection between book bindings and women's clothing.

Books with poor titles or clothing do not obtain a good start in life. They lack the substantial appearance of the desirable companion, and if the books themselves suffer from this handicap it is small wonder that many authors remain unknown.

Of course, I am aware that certain novels are bound in a flimsy form because they are considered the books of to-day, which will be forgotten on the morrow, and their fates are settled because they suffer many handlings in lending libraries. Their rapid demise may not always be caused by careless readers, and is sometimes due to an economical effort upon production.

It makes me happy to know that there are a large number of collectors of modern productions, who for the protection of their own pockets, or because of their regard for good books, do keep and care for their charges as if they were children.

The book-lovers of the future will have cause to thank the collector of to-day for the care which is taken of modern books of merit.

Books are born to be read, but I have seen copies of the best books of the age which have been through a lending library rendered utterly worthless by bad treatment.

One old library book with whom I had a conversation told me that curiosity on the part of would-be readers caused him a great deal of discomfort and pain. He considered that it would be a good plan if publishers gave a short synopsis of the story upon one of the end papers. He had been so described upon his wrapper but had lost this soon after he was published.

At the height of his career he was read by many types of people who lived in fine houses. He believed that many of them subscribed to the library in order to read the books which fashion indicated to them, through the medium of the Press or through talkative friends.

He was, he said, an intellectual modern novel of society life, and he described the many exciting experiences of his heroine, who often stayed away from her husband. His readers all seemed to enjoy the same passages, and some of his pages were hastily skipped, but always the reader's eyes studied those passages which told of the adventures of the heroine.

Once he was even read whilst his mistress bathed and, of course, received several splashes upon his covers which remained to remind him of his narrow escape from drowning.

I felt gratified that I had been saved from such experiences and that my life would be shared with

careful people who would know the value of a good book.

It may be that my author had given me a certain amount of the power of appreciation, for otherwise I should have been unable to think upon the world with such philosophic satisfaction. My nature was charged with a desire to investigate everything around me, and my hours of calm reflection were a pleasing antidote to my more energetic pursuits.

I was satisfied with my sphere and revelled in the joy of being a force for good upon the earth, but my restless nature would not permit me to stay long content with knowledge gained, and I continued to take full advantage of the freedom hours and to search for new and entertaining companions.

One little story told to me by a book of anecdotes revealed a passage in the life of one of the greatest living authors; this book had a natural gift for gossip and a method of telling a story which made him a very great favourite among us.

He had been taken away upon holiday to a town in the heart of Dorset wherein dwelt Thomas Hardy. Indeed, he had been introduced to the sad chronicler of many deep-set domestic love stories, but he had not been of any attraction, owing to the fact that he was of a happy-go-lucky disposition, which was far removed from the moods of his host.

One morning, when the sun was high in the heavens, his master—also an author—took him into the old-world town of Dorchester. The

dust of the road had been tiresome; he turned his steps toward the inn, whereby stood many languid-looking folk who passed the time observing the comings and goings of the slow life of the town.

The old author trod the way upon which his immortal friend had often been, and it was owing to this knowledge that the choice of the inn had been made.

They entered the low-pitched room which was deserted excepting for the attendant wife of the proprietor, who took his order and retired to tell her husband that "another of those author chaps visiting the old man" had come in.

She presently returned, and the author, true to his nature, began to draw her into conversation by praising the quality of the wine which had been served.

"'Yes, sir,' she replied, 'we always serve that special wine to the visitors who come from "Max Gate."'

"'Then you know that I am visiting Mr. Hardy?' queried the author in some surprise.

"'Yes, sir, because I have served you before,' she said proudly.

"'Indeed, and I wonder if you can also remember when that was?'

"'Last July twelvemonth, sir—you came with Mr. Hardy.'

"'You have indeed a good memory. And are you able to remember the faces of all of the customers who visit your house?'

"'Not all, sir, but a good many, though I

shouldn't forget you, for you was the last person to accompany Mr. Hardy here.'

"'Oh, and why has he not tasted of your delightful vintage since then?'

"'He has been in only once, sir, and it was due to my own carelessness that he has stayed away since.'

"The author's interest was aroused and the woman seemed to need little prompting, but he asked for the reason for the loss of such a distinguished patron.

"'Well, you see, sir, it was like this. Mr. Hardy is a very quiet man, as you know. He came here now and again for his glass of wine. I always made it my duty to serve him, and I had never dared to say a word to him.'

"'One day when the weather was very hot, and the sun was shining gloriously, I was foolish enough to remark as I busied myself around the place, "What a lovely day it is, sir!"

"'To my surprise he did not answer, put down his half-emptied glass, felt for the payment, and set it by the glass upon the table. Then he rose, and looking straight before him, left the house and has never been in here since!'"

My companionable volume glanced at me knowingly as if to hint at the strange vagaries of human beings, but I felt that the great author had only shown his nature in a purely sacrificial manner. Thomas Hardy understands women!

This book told me other stories of his life's adventures, but I still hold in my mind the

deliberateness of the wonderful creator of Wessex. After all, there are few men who resist the company of women and wine, even though the woman be a little short of one's ideal and the wine half gone.

* * * * *

Thus my life passed along, with the passage of time, and the year drew towards its close, while the shops outside in the courtway were displaying their Christmas fare to attract the eyes of the passing crowds.

The bookshop remained as usual, and no notice was taken by our book master of the example set by the proprietors of the nearby gaudily dressed windows. Books are most unattractive things when placed behind glass, and even the vivid wrappers of many modern novels make an unsatisfying show.

Gilt, red, blue or green wrappers and others vie with each other in their efforts to attract the seeker after colourful literature, to purchase. The gaudiness of many present-day book wrappers are sufficient in themselves to warn the true book-lover from touching their pages.

Behind plate glass, untouchable and unapproachable, many books wilt and fade because they have been left too long on show and forgotten.

I know of no more incongruous position for a book to be placed in, than the windows of a shop; often high above the heads of the would-be customer. Out of reach and incapable of being

examined by a book-lover, their life is handicapped.

The wrapper upon a book is as satisfying to a book-lover as the label upon a jar of jam would be if given to a sweet-toothed boy.

Though the label states more or less truthfully the nature of the contents, some book wrappers are known to be an enigmatical survey of the supposed contents of the book as seen upon a hasty glance by a harassed and crude artist of the modern school, whose literary taste is as bad as his art.

My book master, I say, did not alter his window; nevertheless we received a steady flow of willing purchasers throughout the week which preceded the festival of Christmas. At the end of that time many of my companions had been purchased and embarked upon journeys into new environments.

My happiness knew no bounds. I looked forward with a great deal of anticipation to spending my Christmas in the ideal surroundings of the cloistered bookshop, and I knew of no better place.

Christmas Eve had dawned through a dull and heavy sky betokening a fall of snow ere the day ended. Towards noon the soft flakes began to settle upon the projecting ledges of the buildings opposite; then increasing showers fell and tumbled over each other until the light within the shop was made more brilliant by the reflected whiteness from without.

The customers had at length departed and I had heard with delight the wishes for a Merry Christmas which came from them with a heartiness born of the true spirit of sincerity.

So many good wishes had been bandied about that day that the whole shop re-echoed for a long time with the pleasing echoes and the very air seemed lighter because of the good will which had been bestowed upon it.

Outside I could hear the people stamping along heavily and beating their hands together in order to keep these extremities warmed. The church clock had only just begun to strike the hour of eight when the book master came down into the shop.

He was muffled up very snugly and his face could just be seen through the folds of the woollen wrap which encircled his throat and ears. His assistants too had prepared themselves for a speedy departure when a cheery voice from the depths of the muffler bade them begone. They jumped forward eagerly for their hats and with a cheery "Merry Christmas" all round, they left the old book master to close the shop as was his wont.

I settled myself in my place to await the coming of the freedom hours, wondering upon the strangeness of the atmosphere, for from without came the sound of hearty laughs from the throats of many folk, old and young, who hurried past the shop, intent upon hastening home to share in the fun of preparing for the joyousness of the morrow.

The sounds became quieter as the night drew on, and the white mantle of the newly fallen snow

spread its covering over the great city and seemed to bid it to rest content beneath its care.

I thought of the happiness of the world, and at last I must have fallen into a deep sleep. I do not remember hearing the familiar sounds of the old clock, and once I thought that I heard the voice of a nearby friendly book whisper, " The ' Seeker ' is asleep, do not disturb him," and the night passed on.

CHAPTER XIII

When I awoke it was so dark in the shop that the ghost light from the outlines of the whitened window-sills served only to intensify the dimness. As I endeavoured to pierce the gloom I heard the first chime of midnight steal fitfully through the air.

To my astonishment I found that I was unable to move. I saw, too, that none of the other books were astir. This served to allay the fears which I had at first experienced, and soon I began to think I had made a mistake and the clock had not yet reached the appointed time.

I listened for any customary sounds. Presently I heard again the chime of the first quarter of the hour—still my neighbours did not move.

The same thing happened at the half-hour and the three-quarters, and I then resolved that I would wait until the full hour which would tell whether I still dreamed.

At length the first dull stroke of the chime came through the air, and I listened patiently as the sounds faded away. Then—boom! came the heavy crash of the bell striking the hour. No more followed! One o'clock!

Hardly had I time to realise that I had heard aright when the whole of the bookshop was lit by a brilliant light of wonderful intensity. The door of the bookcase opened as if by magic,

and I felt myself being lifted out by an unseen hand.

I say unseen, because it was so to me at that time, for I was completely blinded by the penetrating glare which enveloped me with a brightness that seemed as a barrier.

Presently, however, I began to discern the objects around me which still occupied their places in the corner of the shop. I saw the outline of the old chair which had once belonged to the great "R. L. S." . . . Over against the further book-case I could see the brilliantly reflected covers of a massively gilt volume which had been a familiar figure for many days.

I felt that I was in the possession of some super-human being, and yet I did not feel afraid, for the touch upon my covers was very light. My vision came back with my thoughts, and I looked to see the form of that which had so suddenly drawn me from my shelter.

To my surprise I found that I could see clear through it, even to the shelves of books which were behind it. They appeared to me as many faces bending solicitous glances upon me.

I looked at the face of the figure which was half covered by a growth of long white hair, spreading from the brow downwards; it seemed to meet another growth which spread upwards from its chin and cheeks, wherein a small-featured and enigmatical face rested almost buried by the unwieldy mass.

I could see that his features were those of a very

old man, and yet a light of youthfulness shone from the eyes, which lit with kindliness as they regarded me.

The hand which held me was withered and gnarled at the knuckles like the branches of an ancient oak, and I felt them thrill as if a slight breeze had stirred them to life.

The arms were angular and unduly long from the elbows downwards, and though seemingly devoid of muscular strength were shaped very wide at the bend, which gave them the appearance of being powerful and capable of buoying up the weight of the figure by a slight waving motion which they made.

Looking downwards, I observed that the apparition was clothed in a long misty robe which reached to the feet, almost enveloping them, giving me the impression that they would become entangled in the multitudinous folds if he began to walk.

The light which had burst so suddenly upon me emanated from the crown of his head, upon which was a crown made of the pages of myriads of books which waved themselves to and fro ecstatically.

I began to think that I was perhaps in the hands of a book vandal or some other enemy of the world of books of whose existence I had not been aware, but my courage did not desert me and I said in my most natural voice, " Please replace me, good sir, for I wish to be with my brother books upon this night."

" Have no fear, sweet ' Seeker,' you will be with

them again ere long, but to-night I come to show you many things which are undreamed of in the land in which mortals live, and to you I give the joy of beholding that which I am privileged to bestow."

His voice was as the murmurings of many waving grasses, and each word fell from his lips like the light touch of a hawthorn blossom falling gently to the ground.

"That the secret of my soul is to seek the highways and the byways is, maybe, known to you, O Spirit, but will you not tell me who you are and whence you came?"

"I am the spirit of Christmas—born of man, and known by men at this season, and I come at this time to visit those hearts which have shunned me, and to dwell in those hearts which welcome my coming."

"Then where do you live during the remainder of the year?" I asked.

"Ah, my curious 'Seeker,' you know not the ways of the world, for such an obvious question lays bare your simplicity. You must know, then, that I dwell in banishment—banishment from all, excepting for this one day of the year when my spirit enters the souls of many mortals. Then I am called from my paradise of happiness to shed around me the joyous light of many years, and in my presence do mortals rise and acclaim me, for I represent the world in which they would wish to live."

"If human beings wish to live happily, then is it not in their power?" I asked.

"The power of living happily is denied to many, for they live in their own way, giving not of happiness. Only by this can they receive happiness, and the world has little time to spare, because it is always working and striving to attain wealth wherewith to obtain such happiness. Yet all around them if they did but know lies the secret of their wishes—but few have found it."

I became obsessed to know more from the lips of this strange spirit, and I wondered why he had singled me out from among my fellows, so that I asked, "What then do you require of me?"

"I would take you," he said, "upon a journey through the golden lands where sunlight passes, and through the deepened valleys where the silvered light of the moon illumines the faces of they who sleep. I need a companion, my 'Seeker,' and I chose a book with such a nature as your own. I know that you will learn much that will be of value to you, and before the night is any older I will bring you back to the company of your brothers. You will come with me?"

"Yes," I replied confidently, "I seek knowledge with you."

To my surprise the strange, lovable old man began to use his elbows and arms in the manner of wings, and holding me closely to him, we rose together through the rooms above and finally cleft the roof with a suddenness which startled me.

I trembled a little when I looked downwards and saw the tops of many houses, and became

fearful lest I should fall, but the spirit sensed that which I thought, and bade me to have no fear.

Presently we hovered over a narrow, mean street which was littered with rubbish, and the spirit gradually allowed us to drop until we went through the roof of a badly tiled house which did not seem to offer much resistance, and I noticed that, strangely, we did not leave any indication of our strange entry.

My eyes were directed to a huddled mass of rags in one corner of the room which we had entered, and the light of the spirit enabled me to discern the partially uncovered head of a small child who lay sleeping peacefully in the midst of this rough bed.

Presently the spirit called softly the name of the little child, saying, "Awake, Richard! Dwell in my thoughts awhile, sweet child."

Then from beneath the scanty coverlet a small fair head appeared, set with a pair of wondrous blue eyes which looked upon us with mute astonishment. They reflected the shining light which flowed in an increased strength from the head of my companion.

I heard the spirit chuckle softly to himself as we watched the happy, changing expressions which ran across the soulful face of the child. I knew that the little one welcomed the appearance of this wonderful being from another world.

Then the spirit turned towards the bed, and beckoning with his left arm in the direction of the farthest corner with a long, sweeping and compelling

movement, bade the child to look upon the scene which began to unfold itself.

First came a giant Christmas tree filled with a myriad bright glittering balls of many hues, while many shaped crackers were intermingled with a host of tiny toys until the very boughs crackled in their ecstasy.

Then the tree came farther into the room with its burden while the spirit again waved his arm. Through the wall came a rushing, puffing toy train pulling a load of cars seemingly far too many for its power.

Each car was filled with a load of silver-covered chocolates, which looked as if they would have gladly sacrificed themselves to be eaten by the little boy who was now sitting up wide-eyed upon the bed.

Next came a small regiment of tiny tin soldiers led by a gay fellow in a plumed hat, mounted upon a black horse. They too passed by the foot of the bed. Each one gravely saluted the boy, who returned their signals with a slowly lifted hand to his forehead.

Some wonderful picture-books came close upon the heels of the soldiers, accompanied by an elegant white-clad fairy who waved her wand as if urging the unwilling toys ahead to hasten upon their journey.

Last of all came the small figure of one solitary little wooden soldier who marched steadfastly along until he came to the foot of the bed, where he stopped and gravely doffed his tiny cocked hat.

Then leaping across a yawning crack in the floor, he ran beneath the four legs of a low chair which stood against the wall and stood sternly at attention.

I had not noticed that all the other toys had suddenly become lost to view, and I looked for them in vain, but only the upright figure of the tiny soldier remained.

The child, who had not made any remark during all the while, gave a slight yawn, and without even looking again in our direction, laid himself down and was soon again fast asleep.

"Thus," said the spirit as we floated through the roof once more, "you see the wish of my heart unfulfilled, and though I am master of the dreams of men and of children, I must fail in the realities of life because of man's superiority in that.

"That child, whom you saw sleeping, was dwelling in a land of wonderful imagination born of my power and of my love, but he will awake this Christmas morning to find just the little wooden soldier left from the glory of his dreams.

"The other toys which I have shown you are all bound for a home far wealthier than this, but such is the nature of toys that they yearn to please such as that little lad. Any of them would have gladly remained had it been in my power—but," he added slowly, "the power is not mine."

We journeyed along, treading lightly upon the midnight air; far above us a myriad stars twinkled as each kept their watch upon a sleeping form in the world below.

I wished that I could have brought with me many mortals from earth that they too could have learned much from the experience, for the dreams of childhood are around them and with them every day, but are lost in the seeking of vain pleasures.

Presently the spirit again halted and we remained suspended above a well-wooded park, in the heart of which, surrounded by giant trees, nestled an ancient mansion.

Beyond I saw a still lake upon whose bosom was bespangled myriads of scintillating stars, reflected from the arc of heaven.

Sweeping downwards, we passed without resistance through the roof of the mansion with a sound like that of a rushing wind, into a large and sweetly scented room, exquisitely appointed for restful slumber.

The room contained many pieces of pure white furniture of similar workmanship to that of the bed, and the cleanliness of each article reflected the light which shone from the head of the spirit.

We left this room and journeyed through a wall and into a smaller apartment. Here upon the floor lay a medley of many toys thrown about in a wild disorder; many were battered or broken and were crying aloud in their suffering so that I felt grieved and desired to aid them.

Without a word the spirit again took me back with him into the room which we had first entered, and waving his arm as before, he awakened the

sleeping figure of another small boy who rose wearily from the silken mass of clothes which surrounded him.

The spirit stretched forth his arm in the direction of the farthest wall, and through it came again the figures of all the toys which I had seen at the home of the poor little ragged boy.

The Christmas-tree and the tin soldiers and the puffing train were all there, followed by the fairy, but I noticed that they came into the presence of the little boy as if unwillingly.

The silvered chocolates seemed to want to hide themselves, and the train, instead of merrily puffing along, just *rumbled*, and the tin soldiers marched lazily along.

The little boy stood and watched the procession with a nonchalant expression upon his face, and turning his head, wearily laid himself among the bed-clothes and was soon fast asleep, while all the toys waited for a sign from the spirit which was not forthcoming.

The light upon the head of the spirit seemed to dull, and an expression of sadness crept over the old man's face as we floated upwards and away over the trees of the park until the large house lay far behind.

Not until then did the spirit break the long silence, but eventually he said sorrowfully, "All those toys, O 'Seeker,' are doomed to rapid destruction at the hands of an unappreciative boy, and I wish that it was in my power to take them from there to the place where the other lad rests

amongst his rags, but these things are ordained by mortals who study not the minds of children."

A sympathetic understanding of the grief of the aged spirit led me to remain silent, and I knew that I could not satisfactorily express my inmost thoughts to him, though I longed to do so.

I comforted myself by determining to let the scenes which I was to witness that night, and those which I had witnessed, impress themselves upon my mind with an intensity that would never be effaced. Then upon some future occasion I could impart the fruits of my learning to others who had not had the good fortune to undergo the experiences which I was chosen to receive.

Quickly we sped along over many winding roadways, now crossing an open space and the next moment soaring high above tall buildings, when with a downward rush we dropped speedily into another house over which hung a dense cloud which had partially hid its shape from our view.

The room which we entered was dark and sombre. Even the illumination from the spirit's head seemed powerless to dispel the heavy atmosphere which pervaded it.

I looked in vain for a bed or for signs of any human being, but nothing met my eye excepting a long, narrow box which rested upon two trestles in the centre of the room. I felt that a presence, compelling and powerful, dwelt there.

The spirit stood with me silently and for a few moments made no movement. Then with an

unsteady lurch forward he approached the long box, and as if performing an unwelcome duty, he lifted the lid.

Into my view came the uncovered face of an old man who lay motionless in the midst of swathing clothes. Upon his face dwelt an expression unlike any that I had ever before seen.

His eyes though closed yet smiled through the drooped lids, and gave to the rest of his face a look so beautiful and wonderful that the calm and resigned expression seemed to spread around the face.

A sense of unutterable wisdom dwelt upon the features, and the touch of a light hand had dwelt for a moment upon the delicately carved framework of the face.

The spirit drew me towards him and beckoned me to look upon the Thing within the box.

"See," said he, "here lies one who in life missed many of its best joys, and who in death has been brought to a realisation of the knowledge which brings perfect peace. I, with the aid of my brother, Death, have conquered where we were powerless, during the life of this man, to instil any of the thoughts which now are his.

"Do you see the smile that rests upon his face? See how it illumines all around and breathes a sense of hallowed calm, strong with the depth of infinite perception."

Wonderingly I replied, "O spirit—*it* is upon his face."

"Yes," he replied, "you see the kiss left upon

this mortal face by the departing and immortal soul of man as it lingered for one brief moment, when my brother Death reached forth his hand to receive that which he had given, for a brief span upon this earth."

"Spirit, I understand," I said softly.

"And I—knowing that you have seen and understand, am comforted, for I know that I have chosen a worthy companion who has learned a secret far greater than any other. I have shown you that even my service to mankind, avoided by many and scorned at by others during life, yet reveals itself to all men.

"I am welcomed by many people," continued the spirit in a lighter tone, "in the full glow of their living, and it is to these that I pour forth all the goodness which is in my power to bestow. I take you now to scenes which are brighter, that you may have the joy of knowing the gifts of the 'Spirit of Christmas.'"

As he said this he passed his left hand lightly across the lid of the coffin and replaced it as we had found it, then clasping me to him, we sped again through the roof.

Higher and higher we rose and quicker and quicker became our pace, until the ends of his long white robe seemed to lengthen in our track into a writhing stream of phosphorescence laying behind us like the churned waters behind a fast-moving ship.

The spirit's manner had changed completely and he seemed to be intoxicated with a joyousness

which almost possessed him. We rose and fell in the air, turned sideways, then plunged along and around like a leaf blown before the first strong breath of autumn, until I too became imbued with the maddening whirl of the merry dance.

Looking ahead in the direction in which we were travelling, I saw that we were approaching a land lit with many flaming tongues of fire, and I could see that each shaft moved in a rhythmical swaying as if reflecting the curving motion of our advance.

Nearer and nearer to the land we hurried, and brighter shone the glare of the welcoming beams until I heard, very faintly at first, the sounds of many joyous peals of bells intermingling with the songs of laughter from maidens and youths at play.

Then upon the air came the sounds of singing, and the majestic tone of a mighty organ rose in powerful reverberations. Around us, enveloping us, swelled a myriad cries of "Hallelujah! Hallelujah!" intermingled with pæans of praise and joy.

The old spirit seemed to have grown young again. Upon his face rested an expression of the utmost benignity, which spread a celestial light around us as we entered into the full light of the welcome which awaited us.

The varied sounds, and the hues of many lights wrapped themselves around us in a wild medley of gathering vapour, but strangely, each light or sound was possessed of the power to detach itself from the rest, and I could distinguish at will the

joyous laugh of a child or the sighing song of a maiden.

The spirit at length broke the long silence which he had kept and in a merry voice exclaimed, "Now, O 'Seeker,' I take you into my kingdom, and I will show you the joyousness of many who live with me for the happiness of the world."

Then steadily we dropped, until we drifted slowly across the roofs of many houses, and from each I could hear the laughter of human beings rising. Pausing here and there, the spirit stayed for a moment, until with a light laugh he dropped with me through the red-tiled roof of a small neatly built house surrounded by a tiny garden.

A dim light burned in the first room which we entered, and in a voice vibrant with joy the spirit whispered softly to me, "Behold, O 'Seeker.'"

As he said these words he passed his hands before my eyes and I beheld a vision wonderful.

CHAPTER XIV

BEFORE me was the most beautiful picture upon earth—a young mother with a babe at her breast; a tiny mite of humanity born into this world of good and evil—of high mountains and deep valleys, to awaken in loving hearts the uttermost joy of the true meaning of the Spirit of Christmas as in the days of old.

Beside the infant, wrapped in the folds of a soft white gown, was the sleeping mother, her arm encircling her Treasure, a smile upon her lips.

Traced across her delicate features were signs of a grim and recent struggle, while her eyelids flickered as the first relieving slumber performed its work of refreshing the exhausted frame.

Here then was the miracle of birth, whereat men do wonder and women suffer.

Borne upon my senses came the voices of children singing—faintly at first, as if the sounds were wafted from a long distance over stilled waters, but gradually they came nearer; the air filled with the sweet cadence until the words they sang broke softly and clearly upon the hallowed quietude of the room.

The rhythm of the music seemed to dwell around us, holding us in its calm embrace as if possessed of a magic power. I felt comforted and at peace while the words of the children's song came to me:

" Swift fly the years, and rise the expected morn !
Oh spring to light, auspicious Babe, be born !
See Nature hastes her earliest wreaths to bring,
With all the incense of the breathing Spring."

* * * * *

Then the spirit began to search within the folds of his long white robe, while around his head a sudden circle of light appeared, throwing into a softened relief the outlines of his joy-lit features.

Presently he withdrew his hand and lifted it high above his head ; he waved it to and fro with a long wide sweep, passing and repassing, until, with a majestic and widened curve of the pathway of his arm, he released upon the sleeping figures a dazzling and mystical shower of golden dew which fell lightly upon the coverlet of the bed and faded softly away.

A few moments passed and I saw that through the curtains of the lightly shrouded window shone the glimmer of a twinkling star.

Again the spirit dipped his hand beneath the folds of his robe and repeated the movements which he had previously performed. He drew forth a small branch of a lightly leafed tree and shook it rapidly across the floor of the room, showering many tiny balls of sweetly smelling resin. Immediately the room was filled with a delicate lingering perfume.

Yet again did he search within the folds and brought forth another branch. This he waved several times, and then placing it to his lips laid it with the touch of a zephyr upon the brow of the

sleeping mother and upon the closed eyes of the newly born babe, where it disappeared.

The door of the room opened. A young man entered, stepping lightly with bared feet across the room.

At the bedside he stopped and looked upon the two sleeping forms, and I wondered if he knew of our presence, but he made no sign.

I thought that I had seen him before, but could not recall where; then I remembered that it was he who had sold his books to the book master a few weeks before.

Lifting the coverlet of the bed, he stooped and caressed the golden hair of his young wife who smiled in her dreams. He planted a kiss upon her brow where a moment before the touch of the spirit's branch had rested.

Quietly as he had come, he tiptoed from out the room, leaving a fragrance within which spoke of the love of a father made happy with the gift of a new and wonderful life.

"Come," said the spirit, "for though I am happy here I must show yet other scenes ere my time has passed, for the moments are swiftly flying from me."

Away through the night we journeyed again, and this time our path lay straight before us, leading towards a poor and lowly dwelling set in the midst of many mean streets, but as we entered the house we were met by sounds of merriment coming from an inner room, accompanied by the sounds of feasting.

I saw that we had joined a merry throng of folks, young and old, who were seated around a large table set in the centre of a gay decoration of many brightly hued paper streamers.

Upon the heads of each one of the company was a paper cap, and the young girls were flushed with the many teasings with which they were being assailed by the young men.

The older people laughed merrily at the joyousness of youth and kept up a rapid fire of advice, admonition and banter with all the spirit of happiness, mellowed with the cares of age.

" Ha, ha, ha ! " rang out from one of the young men who had cunningly secreted a toy squeaker beneath a cushion which had emitted a pained and long-drawn " sqw-ar-r-k," when it was sat upon by a buxom young girl of some twenty summers and one extra winter as a make weight.

" Oh, Fred," she panted to the accompaniment of loud laughter, " I—I thought it was the cat—you frightened me, and I feel all of a shake." Indeed, she appeared to be quite affected by the incident until Fred had lifted her face to his and implanted a resounding kiss upon it. This had the immediate effect of restoring her to her senses as nothing else could have done.

Presently a long-drawn " Oh-h ! " signalled the arrival of a massive pudding, brought in by a florid-faced woman whose smile was wreathed in the steam which rose from her burden.

All the company clapped their hands in appreciation, and Fred planted a sprig of holly clean in

the centre, while the satisfied housewife sat down, much relieved that her task had ended so successfully.

I have heard of many Christmases being partially spoiled by the refusal of the "King of the Feast" to "turn out" properly upon the important occasion, but I am sure that this masterpiece of culinary art had been coaxed by the hand of a genius.

Later I learned that many years of practice had gone to the perfecting of the art of pudding-making and "turning out," for when all of the company had been served with a portion a thoughtful looking young man named George rose and said, "Mother, I think that you have beaten all records. This pudding is a wonder, and as this is the twenty-first Christmas of your married life, and this your coming of age pudding, I think that we must toast you and father before we proceed to wreck the fruitful masterpiece. So, folks—I am giving you the toast of our parents coupled with the Pudding!"

Then began a hearty round of congratulatory wishes from all who were assembled, and the air filled with many sounds of hearty good will as they drank the healths of the good wife and her partner, who sat by her side.

Then the pudding was tasted, and all voted it the very best that they had ever had put before them. I really think that this was said every Christmas-time, and believed in too; but who could say otherwise upon such an occasion!

After dinner was ended all helped to clear the table, and as we left the spirit waved his arm over them and lifted me away with him to the accompaniment of many ringing laughs which faded as we rose higher upon the air.

"Where laughter reigns," said my mystic companion, "is my dwelling-place, and in the harmony of homes truly breathing the spirit of love and affection I am amongst my dearest brethren. Whoever resists the pleasant music of happy laughter banishes me from their hearts, for I cannot enter where love is not."

These words were uttered in such a tone that I had the impression that the spirit dwelt in other company than my own or that he was addressing someone afar off. Far, far away as in a trance, his voice echoed rather than spoke the words which came from his lips.

"Now," said he in an altered tone as we journeyed along, "I will show you yet another dwelling-place wherein I am happy. We must hurry, for my time and yours grows less, and soon our paths must diverge."

I began to feel a little disappointed upon hearing his words, and to wonder how this strange adventure would end, when the trend of my thoughts was interrupted by the swelling cadence of sweet music.

We were approaching a high pinnacle, surmounted by a large gilded cross which gleamed through a pearly mist laid above it like a silvered wreath.

The spirit swayed in his course as the Cross seemed to pierce the way of our path, and ever louder fell the sound of music upon our ears. Then, as a full-rigged ship gathers speed before a rising wind, did we rush through the night, drawn by the Power of the Cross into the pearly mist, while voices singing hymns of praise rose from the church below.

The fragrance of the lily dwelt in the air as we dropped slowly into the hallowed light of the church. I looked upon the faces of many people turned towards the altar over which we tarried, while their voices rose melodiously to the leadership of a white-robed choir of men and boys.

"Like silver lamps on a distant shrine
The stars are sparkling bright,
The bells of the City of God ring out,
For the Son of Mary is born to-night."

I yearned for power to join in the singing, but though this was denied me I *breathed* the echoing notes of the hymn, and this gave to my inmost soul a wealth of triumphant exaltation.

The music ceased. The priest spoke the words of the Benediction, and the people knelt in silent prayer. Then softly, like a shadow gliding through the church, came a vision beautiful to behold.

Though of man's form, it was of no earthly shape. It seemed as One borne down the ages; aged, but ever youthful; weighed down with sorrow; yet overflowing with a wonderful and holy joy; upheld by a strength born of a great

Peace, like an old and beautiful building which retains its glory despite the storms which have raged about it.

The face, unlike that of any man, yet of the same image, was impassive and inscrutable. In it dwelt a sense of deep knowledge, as if the cares of the whole world were mirrored within the deep-set eyes which shone with a tender light of understanding upon the bowed heads of the multitude, whose souls were filled by His presence with that wonderful Peace of God which passeth all understanding.

Slowly the vision floated by, passing over the heads of each one of the kneeling throng until it came to the steps of the altar where it rested beside the figure of the kneeling priest; then it rose majestically, turned slowly towards the congregation, and stretching outwards both arms, evolved itself into the shape of a cross. From behind came a radiant light falling upon the figure, and throwing the shadow of the cross over the assembly.

Clear and distinct fell the shadow, touching the bowed heads of each, then gradually the light began to lessen and the shadow to slowly fade; one by one the faces of the people were lifted towards the altar, where a strong light radiated through the coloured glass of the tall windows behind.

The wondrous vision departed, leaving the reflection of its glory on the faces which shone with the happiness of That Peace which the world cannot give.

The old spirit, whose presence I had hardly felt during this time stood clasping me in his hand, and, looking upon his face, I saw that it was wreathed in an expression of holy joy.

Soon the soft notes of the organ drifted through the church, and as the throbbing music swelled in volume, the spirit drew his robes about him and rose with me upon the melody of praise until we were far away and out of sight of the tall spire of the church.

At last the old spirit spoke, his words falling tenderly from his lips as he said, "There, O 'Seeker,' shone a light within a Holy Place which gives to man the secret of happiness. We have seen the wonderful love and forgiveness of Christ made manifest to all who had gathered to receive His gift.

"Look where you will, my friend, and for what you will; you can never find a greater treasure than that. No happiness, love, or worldly riches can satisfy the soul of man unless it comes from the hands of Him Whom you have beheld—invisible to human eyes yet Whose presence is *felt* by those who love Him.

"Seek upon earth for many things, and you will find; but the joy of possession will fade.

"The value of the rarest book is as nought compared to the treasures which are bestowed upon mankind through the grace of heaven.

"Now, friend 'Seeker,'" he said after a pause, "I have shown you many of the joys and sorrows of life and death, and time is bidding me to be

gone from here until the number of the days of my banishment have passed and I may come again to inspire men with the joy of living in my spirit.

"I leave the world knowing that many who have been broken by grief or pain have been comforted, that many who have not known the ways of life may become wiser, and that many who yearn for goodly things will obtain that which is allotted to them.

"I must say 'farewell,' O 'Seeker,' and if in your dreams you think of me—let your waking thoughts be of the journey upon which I have taken you—again, farewell."

Then a strange thing happened. The spirit let me fall from his hands and I felt myself dropping rapidly earthwards; I could distinguish far below me the outline of the old bookshop trimmed with a mantle of white snow.

The speed of my descent increased, and powerless to prevent it, I resigned myself to meet the shock of a fierce contact with the roof. I cleaved through the tiling with a crash like thunder, then through the floor, and finally I came to rest upon my shelf of the bookcase.

My fall must have dislodged the uppermost shelf, for before I had had time to collect my thoughts this collapsed, bringing down upon me its contents of heavy books.

Their combined weight pressed upon me until at last I could not bear the pain; my senses began to fail me, and I knew no more. . . .

CHAPTER XV

I HAVE only a few recollections of my slow return to consciousness when at last the weight of the volumes had been taken from me.

Around me I could see the forms of my master and his assistants, outlined against the light from the shop window; they were engaged in lifting the books from out of the case, while my master stood by and examined each of us.

My thoughts at that time would not concentrate. I could only assume that the stirring adventures with the spirit had something to do with my trance, caused by the fall of the shelf.

Later I was convinced that the collapse had caused me to suffer some severe mental nightmares which come only to those who leave this life to visit for a time a world in which they dwell under the influence of pain and a merciful unconsciousness.

Happily, however, these hallucinations left me nothing but pleasant memories. I desired to think that I had been favoured with the kindly ministrations of the wonderful spirit guide of my dreams.

Events which followed led me to believe that I had been so favoured, and my philosophy may be attributed to the advice given me by the friendly spirit.

I could not but think that adversity does not

always reach us to be designated as "just a stroke of bad luck."

It was with these words that the book master summed up the catastrophe, and I heard that a pane of glass had been broken by the fall of the shelf; that several valuable books had fallen to the floor and had become slightly damaged.

When I heard this I felt gratified to know that I had not been singled out by the God of Bad Luck to meet with a worse misfortune than that which had befallen me.

The pain which I felt was due to the weight of the books upon my sides. This soon passed away after my release, when the book master took me in his hands and examined me carefully.

Later I was placed upon a new shelf in a more substantial and commodious case, and the volumes around me seemed to be a desirable company.

My first impressions were borne out by the many pleasant hours of freedom which I spent with them, and I recollect many tales that were told.

It was here that I met a very good friend, and the mere breaking of a shelf had thrown me into contact with him.

How often does a seemingly trivial incident lead us to something of which we never knew the existence, and the happenings of a moment may turn the footsteps of many a wanderer through life?

My first encounter with my new friend came

when I was in the midst of musing over the experiences of my comparatively young but eventful life and I was indulging in a little self-analysis.

The result of my examination was not entirely successful and I wished to be other than I was. I began to be discontented with the work of my author, and wished that I had been born with a different nature, or was the product of the mind of a greater genius.

This mood was upon me when I was approached by a tall and expressive-looking volume, who hailed me with an excited gesture and said, "The 'Seeker'—at last we meet! I have heard of you and have long desired to talk with you—though you have eluded my searchings. Let me introduce myself—tell you what I am—who I am—and all about myself."

His loquacious manner soon disarmed any suspicions which I might have held. His voice breathed a genial note that bespoke a kindly and desirable nature.

"I shall be delighted to make your acquaintance," I replied.

"Then you shall," he added merrily. "My title is, as you see, a strange one, for it is just 'Unwritten,' and my author, desiring to remain anonymous, invested me with still more mystery by having me sent into the world under the pseudonym of 'A Modern Solon.'

"No one has ever met my author, but I can assure you that he is a tall, thin 'Shavian' gentleman with a white beard whose kindly ministrations to

suffering humanity invested in me the desire to follow his methods and to aid the world of books in like manner. Thus I come to talk with you and to show you, through my very nature, why you should rest happily, knowing that you are indeed a fortunate and healthy member of the community of literature."

" Then," I said, surprised, " I suppose you overheard my thoughts ? "

" You have assumed correctly," he replied, " and what is more, I am aware that you ran the risk of losing a certain amount of pride in yourself if you were not assisted to overcome those thoughts. I can speak of many things which will turn your mind's workings into more satisfactory channels."

Hereupon my true nature began to assert itself and I leaned forward in eager anticipation. The talkative volume would no doubt be well informed in spite of his unpromising title, and my manner gave the signal that I wished him to commence his ministrations to my sickened spirit.

" You know, friend ' Seeker,' many things, but to none of us is given the power to know all, and human beings have the failing of being discontented because they are ambitious, and being so can never be satisfied.

" Books contain only that which is written within them, and many chafe under the knowledge which has been bestowed upon them.

" Sometimes, indeed, a book fails to become a masterpiece because it lacks a ' something,' and

others tell of scenes and people in such a manner that they labour under a sense of an injustice done to them.

"I—'Unwritten'—contain much which might have been written and much which could have been written better. I glory that I am by nature capable of talking with books and assisting them to dispel the dissatisfaction which would oppress them in their lonely hours.

"You yearn for expressions within you which your author failed to impart to you, but the work which lies ahead will give an ample reward if your duty is done in the spirit which we self-sacrificing servants of men must have.

"No book may alter itself, though it often happens that a new edition contains many changes, the results of afterthoughts from the brain of the author or of edicts from the publisher or the public.

"Such books are unhappy, for they are not entitled to call themselves first editions like you, and half of the pleasure of life is lost to them, for a book which contains such things as afterthoughts can never consider itself to be a true creation of the firstfruits of the author's mind.

"Each book has its work to do when in the hands of a reader, and it must express its author's style in the best possible manner, for only by a thorough understanding of the mind of an author can his works be truly appreciated.

"An author may in later works change his style and plunge his followers into consternation, as the

great Charles Dickens did when he wrote the 'Tale of Two Cities' and other books.

"He was able to write masterfully in many styles, but it has often caused lovers of his works regret when he altered the manner of his writing, and though his pathos of life is described with faithfulness to detail, it is with humour that we chiefly associate the great master.

"Other authors in subsequent books lose the charm which breathes from the pages of their earlier works, and vainly attempt to recapture the essence of their virgin thoughts so that the result is a work which is but a poor reflection of their genius.

"Such books fail to please them or their readers, because neither realise that the spirit which prompted the earlier writings has changed with a maturer vision.

"These and many other reasons may cause books to be discontented with themselves at times, friend 'Seeker,' and I find that my services are necessary."

Though I was very interested in the delivery of the strange book I could not refrain from remarking that I considered that he had judged me too rashly, and that I even considered he had no real qualifications for the self-appointed task which he had set himself.

"I believe, sir," I said, "that you are exaggerating my needs and that I am not in want of your ministrations. Indeed, I believe that only one half of your title appears upon your covers, for I cannot imagine anyone becoming attracted to such an egotistical book as you appear to be."

He looked calmly upon me as I gave voice to my opinion and then said sadly, "Tell me, 'Seeker,' what is the other half of my title?"

"Unread!" I said shortly, though I regretted my remark immediately.

"Correct—too correct," he answered, "but I am pleased to discover that the ills of others are in excess of the power which you have of discovering your own sickness. You are an excellent critic and I am only a simple healer of the souls of books, unwritten and unread—therein lies the difference between us, but I welcome your outburst, for I begin to know you better."

"I have no wish to hear you further," I replied a little testily.

"Then I must crave that you bear with me and hearken to that which I have for your ears. I must dwell within your heart if only for this one night."

His voice was deep and appealing. I felt moved to express my sympathy with him, and replied kindly, "I fear that I have made a mistake and I shall be glad to listen—though I must confess that I feel drawn towards you a little unwillingly."

The tall thin volume seemed to drink in the words which I uttered and remained silent for a few moments after I had finished speaking. Eventually he replied, "I would tell you briefly of the literature of the 'might have been' that rests within me, for I am no mortal book and my story lies within the pages of many books who have listened to me, even as you will listen and learn to-night.

"In my pages, could you or anyone but see what is written, live the thoughts conceived by many authors, but which have been lost to the world by the strange vagaries of a mysterious fate.

"The thoughts of many masters of literature; the jewelled expressions of wisdom which have fallen from the lips of lesser individuals and the conjurings of many fertile brains have their resting-place upon my pages, for I am imagination's child. I am a revelation to any who will discover me and I am an everlasting tomb wherein lies buried all that will never be, and much that will never be written.

"I am the greatest book of this age, yet I dwell in no man's collection. I am as the bed of the sea upon which rests the golden galleons of bygone ages, and like the bed of the sea I await the coming of fresh treasure."

The strange demeanour of this wonderful book led me to believe that I was in the company of one who had suffered a grievous wrong; as he spoke, the high-pitched tone of his voice lifted until it sounded like the droning of many bees working amongst a myriad fairy bells.

I had become more curious and a little impatient to discover the contents which were within him, but he, evidently discovering the trend of my thoughts, continued to address me in a lower tone.

"I must take you with me in imagination upon a journey through my pages ere I allow you to see them for yourself, and I will tell you in my own

way of many of the joys and sorrows which lie within me. Then you will know me better.

" At once I must tell you that I contain so much and so little that it necessitates a considerable amount of sifting on my part. As I disclose the nature of my pages I hope that you will therefore forgive me for any shortcomings which may become apparent to you. The gift for imagination is a part of my nature, and I trust that I shall interest you.

" Along the paths which we will travel, there are many which lead us to nowhere, but our journey must be taken even though our steps must be retraced, for I think that the fascination of the chase will appeal to you.

" Follow me with the keenness of the huntsman and I promise you that the full meaning of my talk will not be lost upon you."

As he spoke these words I saw that the sky had begun to signal the approach of yet another day, and my strange friend turned and said, " The light of dawn is once more calling the world to renewed efforts. I must leave the story which I have to tell until we meet again upon the threshold of a new day, and so reluctantly I bid you ' farewell.' "

We parted, turning often to look at each other as we made our way to our respective places, and though puzzled by the enigmatical manner of my new friend's discourse I began to look forward to the forthcoming hours of freedom.

CHAPTER XVI

The influence which the previous night's conversation had had upon me was evidenced by the unusual length of the day, and when at last after many hours of weary waiting the chimes of the hour of midnight broke upon the clear air, I hastened to find the mysterious and fascinating tale-teller.

We found each other immediately and retired into a convenient and unfrequented corner where we knew that we should remain undisturbed. Upon my friend's covers a look of dreamy pensiveness dwelt as if he was desirous of capturing some fleeting thoughts, but as soon as we were settled he at once commenced.

" The genius of the greatest writer of the last century, Charles Dickens, has rejoiced the lives of myriads of books who have been fortunate enough to be born for the purpose of distributing the words of this great master.

" One unfortunate volume, however, ' The Mystery of Edwin Drood,' was never completed, and there are many volumes of this book in existence which live, though incomplete.

" Think, friend ' Seeker,' upon the far-reaching effect that such a state would have upon you, and try to sympathise with those unfortunate volumes. Within my pages I hold the key to the Mystery, and I alone can bring to human beings the solution of that which many have tried to obtain.

" Many clever followers of the writings of Charles Dickens have attempted to solve the problem and have only shown by their efforts the feebleness of one man's understanding of the mind of another—for so unfathomable are the depths of thought that the mind of a master is unable to be sounded by a lesser mind.

" Within my pages I show the web-like threads of thought in the master writer's mind when he finished the last chapter which he wrote of the book. Whoever will strive to read me will learn how impossible has become the true solving of the mystery."

I thought that perhaps I was listening to a garbled talk from a book comprised of literary facts, and though I was curious to see into the pages of this enigmatical volume I would not allow my impatience to interrupt the trend of his discourse.

" Upon the third of December in the year 1894, the famous tale-teller, Robert Louis Stevenson, seated upon a verandah of a two-storied house built of green wood, situated in the island of Vailima, was at work upon the task of completing his last romance, ' The Weir of Hermiston.' Who may know the vision that he saw or the voice that he heard as he placed his hand to his head, and shortly afterwards passed away ?

" Within me dwell the thoughts which were severed from the hand which guided the pen, and the passage of time may not deface the picture of the last moments of this man. He lies beneath the arched and starry sky freed from the thoughts

which he would give to the world. I alone can link them to the thoughts of those who wish to dwell with the mind of the master.

"I also hold within me a sympathetic understanding of the remorse of Robert Burns, who, extolled by society, found no words of praise for himself, knowing that within him dwelt an unconquerable laxity which sapped the energies and caused him to groan inwardly at his lack of control.

"I know that which could have followed in later verses after enlightenment had been reached through the medium of his destructive experiences. Verses unwritten, because the poet's inner soul could not be expressed in mortal words even though the arts of a genius were brought to bear upon The Veiling of Truth.

"He who may read my pages can learn of the torments which have swept the lives of many who have given to the world the finest expressions of their intimate delights.

"The glorious songs which lovers sing have dropped from the lips of great sinners with virtue, and I know them all.

"Things which the world has desired to know and to hold are within my pages—the writings of George Meredith and Henry James in an appealing simplicity of style instead of the heavy-toned manner of their telling.

"I know the joy which enters into the life of the immortal Thomas Hardy—the sorrows of Shaw and the conscience of George Moore. The secret

sexual emotions of the great Thomas Carlyle are known to me alone.

"I can dig and divine the workings of the minds of those modern authors who pose. I can linger and learn with others who breathe the spirit of truth throughout their lives and their works—all this is within me.

"The modern poets who attempt to shatter the well-made paths trod by greater men know that in their hearts they must needs follow, and only diverge from the orthodox when the way becomes too difficult for their feet to tread.

"I listen to the whispered songs that break upon the lips of less famous and less lauded poets than those who live glorified by a perverted populace.

"I see the coming masters of the world of literature, where from beneath the covering of obscurity will arise the names of many who, little known or unknown to fame, will arise above the joy of living untouched by meaner joys.

"I am able to sympathise with the racked brains of many authors who, while giving of their best, are doomed to meet the shock of failure. I watch them turn again to till the land of romance, adventure and love, hoping that their efforts will be rewarded. To these I would whisper quietly, 'Hold on'—yet I smile at the temerity of my advice.

"Knowing all these things, and indeed many others, my 'Seeker,' I may be forgiven for appearing a little egotistical, but when you have seen my

pages you will have learned that the spirit of discontent which has striven to overcome you is without a true cause. If my talk to-night has appeared to you without meaning and devoid of a certain directness, then I pray that you will forgive me when you have learned my secret.

"I have never been read, for I have never been written, and though my title serves, I am content to dwell happily with my own imaginative thoughts, and to minister to the little ills that beset other worldly volumes who may benefit by my disclosures and by my philosophy."

These words were spoken in a quiet and steady manner entirely without any trace of conceit, and I had by this time become more curious to ascertain the contents of his pages. At last, unable to stay quiet longer, I said in a supplicating tone, "Your talk has held my interest and the magic of your words has appealed to me, but I wish to see the wonders of your pages, so capable of expressing many marvellous thoughts, and I would know you better."

The tall volume listened to my request, and I had commenced to believe that the mystery of his closed pages would remain with him, when, drawing me closely to him, he replied, "Yes, my friend 'Seeker,' I will show you my secret and you may behold the pages of wisdom which I possess, but I must warn you now, lest the spirit of my exhortation be lost upon you in the suddenness of my revelation, to know yourself as I know you, and be content with all that you have."

With these words the covers of the strange book began to open and I was free to look—with some fear, I must confess—within him.

The very first page was blank and so was the second. As he slowly displayed each and every page to my view I saw that this most unfortunate book was entirely without the necessary art of the printer. All of his pages were blank!

I stood a few moments breathless with the shock of my discovery. A great wave of pity came over me as I learned the shallowness of my own discontent.

This book, though attractively bound, was useless and worthless, but by imagination he had learned to comfort himself. His philosophy was more valuable than the contents of many other volumes crammed from cover to cover with unworthy words.

He lived contented without any visible words upon his scanty pages, while I, brimming over with the choicest words from the fertile brain of my esteemed author, found cause for displeasure in the midst of my happiness.

I looked at my companion and he smiled upon me with a tender expression of fatherly benignity, until my discomfiture was complete. The lesson which I had learned had thrown its fierce light upon me to the full.

I desired to depart; the kindly book restrained me, and with a kindly voice said, "You have seen, then, my friend, that which I do not hold, and you have heard that which lives in my imagination.

You know the depths of my sorrows, for I am not even so worthy a servant of man as you.

"Yet I live content. I exist upon the thoughts of my mind, and in the absence of the printed word I remain happy with the knowledge that I am a book wherein any who can may read the things of which I have spoken.

"I could never be written, for the work is beyond the power of any mortal writer—and being so, I am immortal.

"I can never be read, for none are able to read that which has never been written."

He turned slowly and a light reflected upon his back as he went away, making the letters of his title to stand out as if aflame, "Unwritten." As he disappeared I knew that I had found a true panacea for the ills of discontent—for who could, in the world of books, be more unfortunate than he—and yet he was so happy!

CHAPTER XVII

One day, when the sun's warmth was beginning to again assert itself, I was taken upstairs into the presence of the book master and laid upon a nearby shelf in the room which he occupied.

Though I missed the companionship of my friends, the many pleasing conversations which took place between my master and his customers provided a pleasing change.

During the course of these days I learned that the bookshop was situated in one of the old byways of London, where once had stood a large turnstile erected to prevent horses from straying into the pastures of Lincoln's Inn Fields. To this day the narrow turning provides a speedy and pleasant short cut from the turmoil of a great city into the charm of a remnant of old seventeenth-century London.

Many of the customers were wont to remark upon the restfulness of this old place, though I heard one old gentleman say that it had been marred by the introduction of an ugly piece of modern artillery, which had been placed upon one of the velvety lawns. He added that a memorial of stone, too, had destroyed the contemporary beauty of the oasis, and I should have liked to have had the opportunity of seeing for myself the things of which he spoke.

Another day a smartly groomed gentleman was

introduced into our sanctum. He spoke with a nasal accent and I understood that he had come from America especially to purchase books.

I had imagined that Americans were voluble talkers, but my master carried on the greater part of the conversation, and the American, being a wise man, was content to listen.

The talk turned to the worthiness of books by modern authors, and my master spoke authoritatively upon a subject which I gathered to be of great interest to his listener. His memory was as well stocked as the shelves of his shop, and I could not wonder at the pleased expression which spread across the features of the American.

It was, indeed, a great privilege, and I cannot imagine any happier way of spending an hour or two than in the company of such a worthy follower of the calling of books.

The recreations of people have always interested me, and their tasks, though in many cases irksome, are filled with many moments which can be a delight in the midst of the commercialised rush of the business world.

I have often entertained myself by imagining myself free to choose my occupation, and, as a book of a distinctly unique nature, I think that I would choose the recreational task of secretary to Mr. Bernard Shaw. Though I am not wise enough to understand all that this would entail, the work itself must be a pleasure. I can think of no more attractive occupation unless Shakespeare lived

to-day, when I should have been glad to be employed as *his* typist.

My master's conversation had been of Shaw, and he proceeded to tell his companion of a merry little jest which had recently been perpetrated by this great modern.

It appears that he had been asked to give a lecture in a very small hall situated in the West Central district of London, and his reply was typical.

He said that it would be impossible owing to two reasons, the first being that if the lecture was not advertised there would not be anybody present to hear him. Secondly, that if it was advertised the crowds would be so great that it would be impossible for Shaw himself to be able to approach anywhere near to the hall, so that he would be prevented from giving his lecture under any circumstances!

This story seemed to give the visitor great delight; he laughed heartily and, taking his note-book from an inner pocket, wrote within it, saying, "Well, I guess that is an answer which deserves its place in print."

"It does," replied my master, "and that is the reason why I have told you the story, for the humour of Shaw is unapproachable and irreproachable. Though we receive some good yarns from your side of the ocean I think that our method of 'stretching' it is a little less blatant than yours.

"Well now, since you have asked for opinions

upon the modern authors I suppose that I must not waste time by recounting any more anecdotes.

"You know enough of Hardy, Kipling and other of the famous moderns, and I do not need to give my views upon them, but I presume that you would like to know which of the lesser individuals I can recommend for your attentions this trip?"

"I do that," replied the American, "for though we get various reports on the other side in respect to the popularity and possibilities of your moderns, I realise that many of their so-called reputations are built up upon the hopes of their friends and their 'backers.' I have always liked to place myself in your hands, and I must say that I have never regretted it."

"I thank you for that, Mr. Boston, and I appreciate those recommendatory remarks very much. You can rest assured that many authors, who have fought their way to the front since the great war are in a class by themselves, and need to be watched carefully by the discriminating collectors of representative authors of our times.

"I would suggest the names of several to you, and I believe that among these you will find more than one who will deserve a place among the connoisseurs' collections of desirable first editions.

"The too little appreciated works of H. M. Tomlinson and the works of that great author, Mr. George Moore, are first among my names. I regret that the latter has not cultivated in recent times a reading public, and the expensive editions

of his chief works have placed them out of reach of the keen collector of ordinary first editions.

"Francis Brett Young, William McFee, James Stephens, Aldous Huxley, Lord Dunsany, H. G. Wells, John Galsworthy, Arthur Machen, A. A. Milne and E. M. Forster are a few more for your attention.

"Certain authors are collected because of an unusual publicity which brings them into a sudden prominence. They have a transitory life when brought into comparison with such fine writers as these who, I think, are among the best of the day."

My master also mentioned others in the course of his conversation, but as I have named them when recounting my previous adventures, I shall not trouble to repeat the information which he gave to the American. Those names do not require further notice, and though several were dwelt upon at length I feel that a repetition of the conversation word for word would be an unnecessary tax upon the reader's patience.

"It is a little difficult," continued my master, "to form an opinion of the activities of the first edition market at all times. It is even more difficult to ascertain whether the collected author of to-day will remain the favourite of to-morrow. This is partly due to the increased number of speculators who buy first editions of any author who secures a worthy or unworthy publicity. Very little discrimination is used as to the merits of the writings of many of these popular authors.

"This is evident from the frequency of the rushes made for books by certain authors, when every collector or pseudo-collector scrambles to possess a copy of the latest 'good tip.'

"During the past few years we have witnessed rapid rises in the prices of recently issued first editions, but often they rise only to fall, and their true monetary level is reached after the speculator's attention has been drawn to a fresh 'boom.'

"Without giving an opinion upon the literary value I can mention A. E. Houseman's 'Last Poems.' This book had the effect of giving a strong and lasting fillip to the collecting of the author's earlier work, 'The Shropshire Lad,' now difficult to obtain under forty pounds.

"John Masefield's recent works have commanded many times their original published prices. His 'King Cole' and 'The Dream' are two items which rose high and have now fallen until their value is within reasonable distance of their original price.

"Later we have seen a determined rush for possession of copies of Michael Arlen's novel, 'The Green Hat,' which happily for the author drew attention to his earlier works. Of late even the trade has been astounded at the rapid rise in value of that masterpiece by A. A. Milne, entitled 'When we were very young,'* and even more surprising has been the value which the large paper edition of this book has been considered to be worth.

* Five pounds and thirty pounds respectively.

"Discriminating book collectors of the speculative type are always on the *qui vive* for these 'balloons.' While the demand exists they are able to turn over their purchases to advantage, and I condemn neither their activities nor their purchases.

"Many of the present-day productions uphold our status in the world of literature. Many will be numbered among the best books long after we are dead, and the work of the book collector and of his less 'idealic' confrère does much to force to the front the works of our most capable writers—which is, indeed, good for the trade and for the literature of the country.

"On the other hand, the increased interest which is taken in modern first editions and the greater publicity given by the Press to their values makes it difficult for the second-hand book dealer to meet the demand. Often the first issue of a book is a small number, and few come into our hands at reasonable prices while the high prices are in vogue."

The American here drew out his cigar-case and handed it to my master, who, taking one of the proffered cigars, said smilingly, "I hope that this is not a sign that you wish me to change the subject, Mr. Boston?"

"Not at all, not at all, my friend," replied the other hastily, "but I am thinking that you will just enjoy this brand discovered last week in your city. Like a connoisseur, you know, I must let you share the joy of a pleasant discovery—for you disclose to me much that lies within the treasure-house of your own head."

"That is a little more of your flattery, I am afraid," said my master, smiling; "but you choose a suitable companion for a talk upon books when you introduce the magic weed. I know of no better joys—both charmers of the idle hours, spreading around them a fragrance which only needs the companionship of a glass of good wine to make a trinity which will sink the mind of a man into sweet oblivion."

With these words he went across to a nearby cupboard, produced therefrom two glasses and a bottle of wine, and poured a stream of bright red liquid into each glass.

"There, my friend, we have now the completion of the trinity—your very good health, Mr. Boston."

"And yours, Mr. Goodman—with all success to your efforts. And now please continue to stir the cup of your memory and pour forth into my ready ears still more 'bookish' mead. I have a wife who needs my attentions at dinner, and at the striking of the hour I must leave you—for books must fly when the females sigh—eh?"

"That," said my master, "leaves me but a few minutes more, so I will 'run the rule' over a few other authors whom you may wish to select during your visit.

"I believe that you will not wish to miss the books from the pens of Mr. Cunninghame-Graham, Somerset Maugham, Maurice Hewlett, Hugh Walpole and Hilaire Belloc, as I know that you will like to take back with you a fair representation of our best moderns, so that those I have mentioned may be sufficient for your present requirements?"

"Indeed they will be," answered the American with conviction.

"But," continued my master, "there is one author whose books are built of the finest mental material, and who will, I believe, steadily advance in the opinion of the literary public. I have kept the mention of his name until the last—and his last book, 'The Seeker,' is one of the finest that I have ever read—it is a masterpiece. You can take it from me that John Scribes's name will be writ large upon the roll of literary fame.

"Within the pages of the book there are many passages which gave me the impression that the book itself was possessed of a distinct personality. I felt subservient to it as I read, for it seemed to be reading my inmost thoughts and displaying them ruthlessly before my eyes.

"It stripped my mind bare, and the art of the writer is so perfect that I thought that he must have studied writing under the tutorship of a supernatural master of words. Even I, experienced as I am with books—blasé, if you will—drank deeply of the wonders of this strange volume, and the mystery of the identity of the author is unfathomed—for the pen name 'John Scribes' is no guide."

"Have you a copy for sale here?" said the American eagerly.

"Yes, I have two or three, and one rests at home in my library where it has an honoured place beside my other treasures."

"I must take one of these volumes upon your

recommendation, my friend—I'll take it away with me now."

My master swung his chair round, reached out and took me in his hands, saying, "Here is a copy which I had ready waiting for you, and since I have spoken of the book with enthusiasm I wish you to take this copy as a gift from me—indeed, such is the nature of the book that its very powers of perception will prevent me from ever selling a copy—even to my greatest enemy. Its worth its weight in gold—to me—to you—and to everyone who can read it, but I warn you that it needs a deal of moral courage. Whoever takes this book and fails to read it must consider himself damned beyond any possible aid from a human source—will you take the risk, Mr. Boston?"

"I will—with pleasure—coming from you. I have never been afraid of any man yet, and I'm sure not going to be afraid of a book—but I—I will remember what you said about it."

* * * * *

Once more I had changed owners and once more I had to prepare myself to give to human eyes the wonders which I held within my pages, and I was torn between feelings of grief and pleasure as I left the loved bookshop, hidden in the deep recesses of the American's light overcoat pocket.

My life had come under the influence of the inscrutable ruler of the courses of the lives of books, and my sorrowing was intermingled with the pleasing eulogies which had fallen from the lips of my old book master.

CHAPTER XVIII

My journey ended when we arrived at the rooms which he occupied at a neighbouring hotel, and he laid me upon a table in a corner of his bedroom.

I gave myself to musing upon the possibilities of life which lay before me and I was in the midst of my wanderings when a tall, striking-looking lady entered the room and greeted my new master.

Their conversation passed from general subjects, when he brought me into her presence, saying, "Here is a marvellous new book which my friend the bookseller, Mr. Goodman, has presented to me. He tells me that it is most unusual and reverses the order of things literary. It has the power of reading *you* and not vice versa—so I guess that it will not be safe for you to open its pages while I am about, my love."

"Are you going to read it, John?" she queried.

"Yes, my dear, I'm not afraid of a book reading *my* thoughts, though it might be a risk if it could speak—but I'm sure keen to risk anything after taking you for a wife—eh?"

"I don't think that it will appeal to me, John. I want something entertaining while I am on vacation," she replied, as she handed me back into her husband's hands, "though if it's going to give you wisdom, John, you must read it; but don't forget that little proverb which says that it is far

better to be happy than wise—so I'm avoiding it, anyhow."

John Boston replaced me upon the table, and they were soon engaged in their respective toilet preparations for dinner, and later left the room in each other's company while I dwelt alone with my thoughts.

Diffused sounds of an orchestra reached me occasionally through the deepening gloom of the fading day, and now and again the laughter of a woman struck a pleasing cord which vibrated around the room; from without came the noise of the passing traffic of the great city.

I thought of the conversation which my late master had had with the American, and I became conscious of a new power within me when I recalled the words which had been spoken in my praise.

Strangely, I had felt nothing of this when I had lain in the hands of my first reader—I had felt united to her—and filled with a spirit of sympathetic understanding.

She had drunk deep of the writings within me and had seemed to live with each word that I placed before her.

I now determined to probe the depths of my master's mind; I felt that an inspiration for this was received from the soul of the old book master.

Upon the following day I knew that my powers were to be put to the test, for shortly after breakfast the American took me with him into a large room upon the ground floor of the hotel. He sat down

upon a finely upholstered divan, lit a cigar and opened me, a little carelessly, at my first page.

His eyes looked upon me with a light which I quickly divined to be the reflections of the burnings of a mind tainted with worldliness.

Upon his face dwelt an expression which was not in unity with the knowledge which shone from the mirrors of his mind.

Soon his attention was drawn from my pages, and following his glance I saw that he looked upon the dainty figure of a neatly clad girl who passed by in the company of an elder woman.

I sensed that his thoughts were dwelling upon the joy of possession of this innocent creature. The smile of the man drew itself into the lustful look of a beast as he watched her disappear from sight.

As his thoughts returned to me I *willed* that his fingers turned my pages until his eyes were forced to rest upon a passage which my author had written, as if in tongues of fire :—

" The value of a man—what is it ? The balance which lays to his credit at the bank ? The worth of a son to his mother—or to a wife as her husband ? The brutish strength of him or the clever brain which he possesses ?

" No, reader—you alone can know your own true value to the world—to those who hold your love, and to yourself. Your own opinion of yourself at this moment will tell you of your true worth.

" I am the ' Seeker,' and whosoever reads me with sinful mind or eye must know that I read that which is within you. I alone of all the books

in this world—excepting one—have the power to search and to find!"

His eyes dwelt upon the words for a few seconds, then he abruptly closed me, and placed me beside him upon the divan. I was enabled to watch the changing expressions of his face, and ponder upon the effect that I had produced.

His top lip curled slightly upward, and I knew that he searched his mind for excuses which would enable him to throw from him the truthfulness of my words.

One hand waved in an impatient gesture, and I knew that he was struggling to obtain an expression of outward calm which would not betray the true lasciviousness of his thoughts.

Soon no outward sign was apparent of the impassioned faithlessness which had swept his countenance upon the arrival of the girl. His features resumed their normal look, but I knew that my words had failed to draw him from the path upon which he trod with such unsteady feet.

I knew that I should never again be read by this man. The kindness of my old book master would be lost upon one who stood in need of the wisdom of my writings. He had, perhaps, misjudged his customer, but something seemed to tell me that he had as good a knowledge of the ways of men as he had of the worth of books!

Upon two or three other occasions the American took me into his hands, but each time his glance dwelt upon my covers in a cursory manner, then he would lay me down again with a dissatisfied grunt.

His wife one evening facetiously asked him how

he had enjoyed reading me, and he replied nonchalantly, that he had not liked me very much, for I contained "too much darn moralising" for his liking.

She replied softly and with a careless smile, "Did I not say, dear, that it's better to be happy than wise? I don't think that a man of your ideas can ever hope to be happy if you moralise too much—eh?"

"Guess you're right, my love, all the time. I will say that I think that John Blank must be a much better man than I am—but I can't stand his method of shovin' across his preaching at me—preaching's out of date, anyhow!"

With these words I was thus dismissed from his mind, and prevented from giving my services where they would have been of the greatest value. My spirit was bruised by the unwelcome treatment and obvious misunderstanding to which I had been subjected, and I again longed for the comforting company of books.

In the heart of the American, I knew, lay a wish to know me better; but his moral courage once having failed to assert itself, it was beyond my power to assist him, for without he read me I could not exert my influence.

My fortune and that of my author was dependent upon the pleasure which I gave to those with whom I came into contact, and I lay neglected and forgotten, powerless and lonely, while my mind began to devise many mad schemes which would aid me to free myself from the unwelcome ownership of the American.

CHAPTER XIX

I KNEW that I was a masterpiece from my author's mind and a rich treasure to whoever would take the trouble to read me. Though not prone to console myself with faint hopes, I sought consolation in believing that I should one day find a reader who would value my worth, and to whom I would give of my wisdom.

The American was a rich man and undoubtedly suffered from a fault common to his class, of buying or accepting upon a recommendation anything which appealed to him at the moment. He desired intellectual enlightenment at the least cost of effort to himself, though I knew that he had ideals. I was forced to realise that his mind was diseased to such an extent that I—a mere book—could never aid him towards better things.

I could not console or preserve this man's mind, for I had dwelt within him, and I knew that power and wealth were greater than I, for they were able to assist him to perfect his well-assumed pose of righteousness which he wore.

My companionship had been spurned; the gifts which I longed to freely spread around me had been refused so that I felt lonely and forlorn.

I longed for a miracle to happen that would free me from my sorrowing, and in the long silent watches of the nights I prayed that some unseen or some unknown friend would come to my aid

and lead me to one who would welcome my worthiness.

The many experiences of my life continued to appear before me, and I lived again with the spirit guide who had taken me upon the mystical journey that Christmas Eve.

When I remembered the home of the little boy whose only gift was a tiny wooden soldier, I recalled the troops of unwilling and expensive toys which had come to rest at the foot of the bedstead of the destructive child, and I began to feel faint with weariness.

Then the turbulence of my mind gave way to a calmer sense which came to me from the knowledge that I was in the presence of one who sympathised with the sensitiveness of my nature.

Though I was unable to see a material form I seemed to be enveloped in a calm embrace which solaced me into a dreaminess, and I dwelt in a land peopled with many white-clad volumes. . . .

I opened my eyes . . . hardly daring to believe that I should see other than the American's hotel bedroom. . . .

At once I knew that my wish for emancipation had come true. Around me in massive tiers stood rows and rows of books who gazed upon me with benevolent eyes which reflected a light upon me, warming my heart with thankfulness at my deliverance.

A sympathetic understanding pervaded the atmosphere and the feeling of wonderment which I had at first known soon passed away when the realisation

came to me that I had been transported into a land filled with books, each one of them a friend.

Where this wonderful land was situated I had yet to learn. Such an unimportant matter as this did not give me any cause for uneasiness, yet a dim light from a dusty electric lamp overhead gave evidence that I still dwelt in a land of human beings.

Around the walls, in the few spaces which were not occupied by books, I could see the dim outlines of moderately sized posters; but I was unable to learn from them any facts relating to the place wherein I found myself.

An intuition told me that the hour was past noon, but that it had not yet reached the time when weary labourers shoulder their tools, and with tanned faces turn their steps homeward.

The hours passed; I felt contented to rest calmly and patiently, for I had little reason to anticipate any intrusion which would be unfavourable to me.

At length the door at the end of the room opened and a man entered. His head was uncovered and he wore a suit of dark material which was half hidden beneath a drab apron which had originally been white, but was soiled by many marks of dirt.

My mind had prepared me with imaginative visions, to expect the entry of a brilliantly clothed and mystical deity who would perhaps lay his hands upon me with a supplicating touch. I had even been prepared to meet again the friendly spirit of Christmas Eve, so that the appearance of this very prosaic figure caused a little disappointment.

His eyes had not an expression which betokened a lover of books. His breath emitted an odour which had not the scent from floral blooms, neither did his gait give me the impression that his feet were shod with fairy shoes.

No! He lumbered in and around the room—just an ordinary man. Yet seemingly he had control over this vast empire of print, and doubtless ruled them in the manner of great rulers who know not the lives and loves of the people over whom they hold dominion.

He busied himself in a somewhat nonchalant manner by touching a volume here and there with a grimy hand, and straightening piles of books which were in danger of falling. Others he would pick up and place upon spaces in the surrounding shelves.

Presently he approached the table whereon I rested, and lifted me on to a nearby shelf, where he left me standing upon my edges in close proximity to others similarly placed.

The strange manner of the man had now no interest for me, but I watched him slowly walk to the door. He reached for a small switch set in the wall, clicked this, plunged the room into darkness, and disappeared.

I knew that I had ample time before me ere the first minute of the freedom hours arrived, and I busied myself with many conjectures of the meaning and manner of my happy transition.

The solution of the problem was no nearer after several hours of puzzling. I at last resolved

to obtain the information from a friendly book as soon as the opportunity presented itself.

When the first chime of the midnight hour came from a neighbouring clock, the usual movement among the books became apparent; I knew that I was still in a world inhabited by quite ordinary volumes. I began to search for a book who would provide me with pleasant companionship for the night, and enable my curiosity to be satisfied.

One volume attracted my attention because of the very knowledgeable air which he wore. He was clothed in a brown cloth cover and was rather portly, giving me the impression that he had reached a comfortable middle age.

I therefore intercepted the path which he took, and without fear or nervousness placed myself before him, and greeted him with my most affable manner.

He stopped at the sound of my voice; then signified his willingness to talk with me, saying, "Your title is, I see, 'The Seeker.' You are a stranger to me; though I, or one of my several brothers, contain a record of nearly every book of importance, I cannot remember having seen your name before."

Thereupon I gave him some particulars of myself, and he appeared to be impressed with my manner. I added that I should be pleased to know with whom I spoke, for it had become evident to me that the volume wore an air which betokened him to be one who was a power and an authority in the world of books.

"It is natural that you do not know me if I do not know you," he replied, "for I am the 'Books Recorder,' known generally as 'Book Auction Records,' but familiarly as plain 'B.A.R.,' though among books I am known as just 'The Recorder.'"

"Of what, then, do you tell?" I asked, for his manner of speech, though authoritative, was pleasant.

"I tell of the prices which collected and valuable books command in the great auction sales in this city of London and elsewhere. Books that were printed when the art which made them possible was first practised, or books printed in our own times, may find themselves enshrined within my pages. The prices set upon their heads are recorded within me."

"Do you not know my value, then?"

"Alas," he replied sadly, "I have no record of you—though you look comely enough and likely to be valuable some day, that I marvel at the absence. When were you published?"

"Last year, I believe."

"Ah, that is the reason explaining your omission. You are a very modern publication. Have no fear, however, for you will soon be recorded within the pages of one of my brothers, that your name may never die."

"How do you know that, sir?" I asked.

"By pure logic, my friend—pure logic," he said in a confiding tone, "for you are here—you are for sale, presumably to-morrow, and the scribes

who edit me will be in attendance. They will note your value for publication in the pages of my next yearly volume."

"I for sale!" I exclaimed excitedly. "How do you know?"

"Oh, 'Seeker,'" he replied a little wearily, "when I tell you that logically you are for sale, you must know that I am a book whose word is seldom doubted, for accuracy is my motto—otherwise I should be deposed from the proud position of Recorder.

"There is no cause for unnecessary alarm in my information that you are for sale, for seemingly you are a little scared with my news."

"I am not alarmed at the prospect of being sold," I replied, "but rather I am surprised that I should be for sale at all, as I do not know by what means I have obtained entrance to this place. Can you enlighten me?"

Then I told him of my adventures and of the violent dislike which I had taken of the American. He listened to my story until I had finished with the magical transportation to the saleroom.

I had become absorbed with my own story, and as I unfolded it my position in his company became more and more inexplicable. When I had finished I looked in vain for an expression of wonderment upon his face, but I saw that he smiled down upon me with a touch of pity mingled with joy.

"Ah, how pleasant is my task, friend 'Seeker,' for I can enlighten you. You are unaware of the great power which guards the welfare and destiny

of all good books. You have been sent here—as many other books are sent—so that you may fall into hands that will appreciate you.

"Doubtless you remember that you passed into the world of men, through the prosaic method of being sold from the counter of a bookshop; but you have not known that from then you have been watched over by the Guardian of the Golden Gates of Literature. You passed through his portals when you came into the hands of your first owner, and now, through his care, you have been brought here."

This was indeed a revelation, and I marvelled. My innate curiosity again took possession of my speech and I said, "You have told me much, O great Recorder, but I pray you to speak to me of the manner of my arrival at this place. I have no remembrance of ever having taken a journey, or having been moved by mortal hands."

"That," he replied, "must remain a mystery. Many books find themselves mysteriously transported here, but they are never enlightened for what purpose or by what means they have been sent."

"Then do you live here—that you are able to speak with such assured authority of the ways of this place?"

"Yes, I and my brothers—who number over a score—are resident here. We are used for reference work, and as the years pass our numbers are increased by the annual addition of one more member to our circle."

"Your life must be filled with interest," I said.

"Of passing interest would be more correct, for, unfortunately for us, the books which come to these auction rooms stay only a short while, and then go out into the world again. I make many acquaintances but never any friends, though I hold pleasant recollections of some of the books which I have met."

"Is it possible for you to live content and in accord with life, even though you do not provide your readers with any literary relaxation or mental stimulus?"

"Certainly," he replied, "for I know that I am valued by all book men. I record the inaccuracies of other books; I tell of their associations, and I tell of the past and dwell in the present. What more could one wish for than that?"

"I believe that I should feel sad to be as you are," I replied, "because you seem to be just a catalogue of cold facts devoid of any human interest —a book without a plot—without a story to tell, and without a message to give."

The Recorder looked gravely upon me and I at once realised that I had again shown my ignorance, so that I prepared myself for any outburst which I felt would justifiably be due.

But he showed no vestige of anger as he drew me closer to him and said kindly, "Look, my friend, at my 'cold facts.' Here are prices which though to many appear to be just records of plain values, tell of great battles fought—of a victor and the vanquished.

"Look upon this page and see the record of the sale of 'Shakespeare's Comedies, Histories and Tragedies, first folio,' which you will note was described as being defective in many ways—yet see its value—£500! Can you imagine the human interest which was displayed when this wonderful book came before the thronged room?

"Look upon the opposite leaf and you will see that I record the passing of a copy of 'Queen Mab' by Percy Bysshe Shelley, described as 'another edition in boards, 1821,' which was sold for the small sum of three shillings only. Does not the romance of my contents now begin to appeal to you?"

"Yes," I answered, becoming absorbed by the fascinating revelations. "Show me more."

Then he began to turn over his pages with the joy of a collector showing his treasures, and I knew that this seemingly uninteresting book possessed a mind filled with memories of many things.

"There is one book," he said sadly, "which neither I nor any of my brothers has recorded, and which will never be recorded, for it has been lost to the world for ever—a loss so great that many sentimental authorities have almost been moved to shed tears. I refer to the copy of John Keats's 'Lamia' which was found upon the body of the drowned Shelley. This was the property of the poet Leigh Hunt, who through an act, on the one hand divine, yet on the other inhuman, caused the volume to be burnt with the remains of his friend.

"Leigh Hunt acted as his mind prompted him at the time and gave little thought to the wishes of the world. How much more noble would have been his action if he had rescued the book in order that it could rest enshrined with other great volumes, in the library of the British Museum, where all could see it!

"Happily," he continued, "there is in that wonderful collection one particular great relic of the nobility of a man which is a lasting tribute to his thoughtfulness towards humanity. There rests the diary of immortal Captain Robert Falcon Scott, who perished with his comrades amongst the wild and desolate wastes of snow and ice.

"I have often thought of the difference which is apparent with these two examples—Leigh Hunt living and condemning to the flames a treasure which will be for ever mourned, and Scott—dying, but leaving by his side a treasure which will be for ever known!

"Did Leigh Hunt know the words of the great Shakespeare who wrote—

> "One fire burns out, another's burning;
> One pain is lessened by another's anguish."

"Even as one closed the door upon a joyous thing when his friend took with him that unique treasure, so did the other open his heart with the writing of his last words, and men weep when they think of their passing."

The Recorder and I stood silently together as he finished his mournful soliloquy, but the mood

soon passed when he drew my attention to another entry which he held.

"Look at these records of the sale of some of the works of the resolute John Milton, and see the value of a copy of a first edition of his immortal poem, 'Paradise Lost,' which you will note brought over three hundred pounds.

"Dwell with me in fancy and see the long years of toil and the unswerving patience which at last enabled the author to complete his task. The terrible years of the Great Plague and the Great Fire caused a long delay in publication. How strange are the ways of books! Milton received the trivial sum of ten pounds for his massive work, and I feel that his spirit must have hovered over the heads of those who attended here and hearkened to the voice of the buyers as they sung his worth in bids of pounds sterling.

"Yes, friend 'Seeker,' I hold within my pages more romance than can be found in most books if a little imagination is brought to bear—and what is romance without imagination!

"See this entry concerning a copy of Shelley's 'Refutation of Deism: First edition, 1814,' which is a record of a great discovery made by Edward Dowden the biographer of Shelley.

"'Picked up in Dublin, on a moving handcart of old books'!

"So reads the note, and further it states that it was the author's gift copy to Mary Godwin and contains many words in his handwriting. This interesting copy found its way to America,

where it was sold for the English equivalent of £690.

"Picked up in Dublin! Can you imagine the travels of this wonderful book? Why, I have spent many pleasant nights following the adventures of this volume ere it came into the worthy hands which found it—seemingly by coincidence.

"The handbarrow threaded the streets of Dublin and Edward Dowden's path was obstructed by it. You know, my friend, that such a discovery would be classed by many as a piece of good luck, even though the finder could not conjecture 'how it came to Dublin.'

"You did not know how to account for your own presence in these salerooms, but the Guardian of the Golden Gates of Literature has control over both the seekers and over that for which they search. Already your destiny has been decided, and the will of the Guardian is able to thwart or reward the endeavours of men.

"You will be taken from here into the room which adjoins this, but though thoughts of the experience may dismay you—have no fear—for no ill is likely to befall you. Then if you find happiness in your new home I ask that you will think of me sometimes.

"The dawn is now approaching. I may not part from you without wishing you success and a hope that you will fetch a price worthy of your value to the world of collectors and others."

Ere we parted I thanked him for the generous

kindness which he had shown me, and for revealing to me the things which I wished to know.

I felt happy in the knowledge that one day a record of my visit to the auction rooms would find a place within the pages of one of his descendants, and I resumed my position with my outlook upon life once again hopeful.

CHAPTER XX

During the next morning a ticket with a number was placed within me, and I was removed into the adjoining room.

This was larger and brighter and crowded with a moving stream of keen-visaged men who moved slowly around the shelved walls, examining the various books which were displayed.

Their passing interest would now and again be checked as they became attracted to the charms of one or other particular volume, which would be taken down and examined.

Each visitor carried with him a printed list of the books, and I saw that occasionally one would write a mysterious mark against the number of a certain volume.

From my position upon a conveniently placed shelf I was able to study the faces of the men. I noted with interest that each bore unmistakable signs of personality and individuality to which was added expressions of keen perception and a benignity which I thought must have come from many years' association with literature.

Often I was taken down and examined, and the procedure adopted was similar in nearly every case. First my covers were scrutinised, then my edges.

The book man would then open me carefully, resting me within the opened palm of his left hand while he studied my title page, back and front.

Next he would allow my pages to run lightly through his fingers as he sought for imperfections. One or two went to the trouble of holding me up to the light to compare the texture of my end papers with that of the rest of me.

Then with a final examination all over, I was replaced upon the shelf, where I looked forward to the arrival of my next likely purchaser.

Later a period of calm succeeded the bustle of the morning. The room became hushed as a figure entered and took his place upon the raised dais situated at one end of the long room.

He was accompanied by a little man who carried several bulky books in his arms and who settled himself down at a desk by the side of the more important-looking gentleman.

This man, I thought then, must be an emissary of the Guardian of the Golden Gates of Literature, and his attendant was the scribe who would record the passing of his charges.

Meanwhile the company in the main portion of the room had gathered themselves around at a respectful distance, where some sat, and the remainder took their places behind them.

The Guardian on the dais had placed beside his left hand a small hammer, and upon his nose rested a pair of gold-rimmed glasses, which I thought must be magic mirrors to enable him to see into the souls of the men gathered before him, so that he could read the trend of their thoughts.

His fingers fidgeted for some moments with several small and invisible things upon the dais,

until I saw that in his right hand he held a pen poised ready for service. The silence which had prevailed became still deeper, but was now and again broken by an impatient coughing from one or two of the assembly.

After the lapse of a few more moments the Guardian made a rasping sound with his throat and then said in a small, matter-of-fact tone, " Gentlemen, Lot number one. A first edition of George Moore's Trilogy, ' Ave, Salve and Vale ' —three vols.—fine condition—bids ! "

The sale had commenced, and I, who had expected a ceremonial opening upon such an important occasion, remained astonished and disappointed.

A little man seated in the very front row replied to the Guardian's exhortation by saying quietly, " A pound."

Another added, " Twenty-five."

" Thirty," said the little man.

Then many more joined in the weird chant until someone said loudly, " four pounds."

This seemed to anger the Guardian, for he rapped angrily upon the dais with the little hammer and said something to his companion which was inaudible to me. His remarks were evidently important, for the little man jotted them down in his book.

The great man then said, " Lot number two— Hardy's ' Song of the Soldiers '—one of twelve copies privately printed.

The prices which were hurriedly thrown at the

Guardian came from many of the eager throng, until the final victory rested with a man who said shortly and abruptly, " Ten pounds," and the hammer fell again, so that I understood that this was the signal which decided the destiny of each book.

Again the voice from the dais—" Lot number three—two Kiplings—all faults—' Dreadful Night ' —' Under the Deodars '—first editions—bid ! "

This time the little hammer fell when the price had reached twenty pounds, which seemed very high for such strangely named volumes ; but evidently the uniqueness of titles had no influence upon the prices, for later a book named " The Snob," by William Thackeray, found many friends despite his unsociable name.

He was purchased for the large sum of three hundred pounds, a price which I thought would enable him to become even more snobbish in the future.

I watched the proceedings with interest and heard the fates of a great number of volumes decided in the same manner. Meanwhile I awaited my turn to be called before the tribunal presided over by the monotonous-voiced Guardian.

The tap of the hammer reminded me of an acquaintanceship which I had made with a copy of Charles Dickens' " Tale of Two Cities," and I seemed to hear again the rumble of the tumbrils and the fall of the guillotine, beneath which sat the old needlewomen, who as they stitched, counted the numbers of the fallen heads.

Each book met its fate in the same way, and the voice of the Guardian continued to tell the numbers of the doomed.

The nodding heads of the buyers below me were to me as a crowd of interested spectators, and the tap of the hammer caused them to give no evident signs of the emotions which they may have felt as each book was severed from its old associations.

"Lot ninety-one!"

The voice re-echoed around the room until drowned by the babble of the crowd.

"Lot ninety-two!"

"One hundred and twenty-five—fifty! One hundred and fifty, gentlemen—going—last time." Tap! "Lot ninety-three."

So passed a "special copy" of Lord Byron's "Poems on Various Occasions," described as "a fine copy, Newark, 1807."

Suddenly I was lifted down and hurried into the centre of the room, where I was passed rapidly around from hand to hand while I heard the voice from the dais ringing in my ears. "Lot ninety-three—'The Seeker'—by John Scribe—first edition—bid!"

"Ten shillings," said a frail-looking old man who had handled me eagerly.

"Fifteen," said another from a far corner.

"Twenty," repeated the old man.

"Twenty-five," came again from the corner.

"Thirty," persisted the old man.

Then came a slight pause, and the Guardian

echoed, "Thirty—that all? Last time—going at thirty shillings." Tap!

The old gentleman felt in his pocket with a shaking hand and drew out two very soiled and crinkled notes which he handed to the assistant by his side.

He received me lovingly into his hands, and looking kindly upon me, placed me into a small leather case, where I rested in the midst of a soft wrapping of tissue paper.

Then I felt him rise from his seat and I knew that we were leaving the auction rooms to seek new adventures.

At the end of our journey I was taken from the case and held in the thin hands of the old man. His eyes lit with pleasure as he regarded me, and I became aware that a powerful bond of sympathy existed between us.

I saw that his white hair curled in soft locks across his forehead, forming a fitting setting to his clever, delicate face. I noticed lines around his eyes and mouth which upon closer acquaintance I divined to have been stamped with care rather than the passing of years, for his skin retained the texture which I knew was not to be seen upon the faces of very old people. The brightness of his eyes gave an indication of a mental alertness which was out of keeping with his whitened hair.

Though his hands shook as he held me, they had not the tremulousness of the aged. I fancied that it was with joy that they trembled.

The touch of his fingers gave to my spirit a

sense of unmistakable calm, which remained with me when he at last placed me upon the table by his side.

He searched in the dark recesses of an old cupboard, and presently drew into the light a quantity of paper and string, which he laid next to me.

Then he crossed the room and brought with him a bottle of ink and some writing paper, and sat at the table surrounded by the miscellaneous collection which he had drawn together for his service.

His attitude became mournful while he busied himself with writing, and often his head would sink sorrowfully upon his hand and a sigh escape his lips.

Over his face spread a look which seemed tinged with thought, and the fingers resumed their task as if unwilling to guide the pen in its work.

I knew that the mind of this old man was oppressed with the knowledge of an unpleasant duty to be done, yet I caught a gleam of hopeful pleasure in his eyes.

At length his task ended. He placed the letter within my pages, where I held it securely in my charge, while he laid open several large sheets of paper.

Then to my chagrin and disappointment he began to enwrap me in many folds of the paper until I became uncomfortably hot and could scarcely breathe.

I felt the tightening of the string around my

sides so that my discomfiture was complete and my anger grew, only to be superseded by an intense wave of disappointment when I realised that I was imprisoned and bound down.

I knew not the course which fate had designed for me to take. The letter within me beat against my pages like a bird in a cage, until I was forced to remonstrate with him upon his conduct.

I fancied that he heard my voice, for his struggles became less, yet I was unable to understand his reply to my entreaties owing to a loud noise which penetrated from without.

Later I felt myself being carried along with a rapid motion and then thrown down upon my side with a shock which partially stunned me. My senses began to leave me and I hold a dim recollection of a blow which finally sent me into a state of unconsciousness. . . .

Then I believed that I heard someone calling me. . . . I tried to rally my thoughts . . . to realise where I was. . . .

Some minutes elapsed ere I became sufficiently conscious to recall the cause of my misfortune, but suddenly the memory of my experiences during the past hours flashed upon me.

The tiny voice which I had heard still persisted in calling me, and I felt that I was being carried along at a faster speed than I had ever travelled before.

I seemed to be engulfed among many other bundles or parcels, and the air was filled with unusual sounds which penetrated in a diffused

murmur through the wrappings which encased me.

Again I heard the small voice calling, and by this time I was able to reply, "Who calls?"

"It is I," came the reply.

"Who are you?"

"I am the letter which is within you—here."

Then my usual sense of curiosity obtained possession of me, and I realised that here at any rate was someone with whom I could speak. Even if the conversation should prove to be different from my inclinations, I should at least have been enabled to pass the tedious hours, for I had never spoken with a letter before.

"Do you wish to speak with me?" I asked.

"Yes," he replied. "Do you not know whither we are bound?"

"I haven't the slightest knowledge—and I am not really greatly interested in anything beyond getting released from here."

"Ha ha!" he laughed. "You are indeed a strange book, for you must know that you cannot be released until we reach our destination."

"Is our journey a lengthy one, then?"

"Our *destination* is the suburb of Brackham, which is on the outskirts of London—but I can assure you, my friend, that our journey will not end at the place to where we are directed—not if I know anything of human nature."

"You are prone to talk somewhat enigmatically, I believe," I replied with a trace of annoyance.

"Then you should allow me to explain myself in my own way," he added a little testily.

"I pray that you do so, friend," I answered in my most conciliatory manner, for I hoped that he would tell me of the meaning of this strange adventure; whither we were bound, and what would become of us.

"Then listen," he answered in a pacified tone, "and I will read to you that which has been written upon the leaves of my person, by the perpetrator of our misfortunes, for this will explain to you all that you are desirous of learning."

I felt him move slightly and my ears were strained to catch every word of the explanatory letter, and he spoke in a very solemn tone these words:—

"'My Dear Son,—I am sending you a copy of a book written by a very old friend of my own, John Scribe, and I trust that you will appreciate it.

"'I have chosen this book for two reasons, the first being that I know that you may gather from it much that will be of value to you in the future.

"'Secondly, that you may read of many things which will assist you to tread a different road than that which your father trod, and so avoid the remorse and despair which has come to me as a result of the misdeeds which I committed in my youth.

"'This book will tell you in its own way much that I have desired to tell you, and I have obtained a first edition because certain passages were omitted from the second edition, for reasons best known to the author.

"'I have long wished to send you this book, but until recently I have been unable to discover

your address, and I have taken the very first opportunity of sending you a copy.

" 'I am now only sixty years of age. I begin to feel that the hand of death is closing upon me, and though I have been shunned by you—perhaps justly—I pray that you will accept this volume in the spirit in which it is sent.

" 'Read it, my boy—read it—for I shall then rest content in the knowledge that you have learned through the agency of the printed word that which I have known in life, and that which I have lost.

" 'Your ever-loving father,

" 'JOHN STANTON.'

" There! That's my message, friend 'Seeker,' and now you know exactly the mission upon which we are bound, though I must tell you that the end of the journey will not bring us peace. No! for this son of old John Stanton is an unworthy reprobate, and I have fears for our very lives."

" How do you know this?" I asked tremulously.

" I have learned this when at nights I have heard the old man pacing the floor and moaning upon the misdeeds of his past life, and lately I rested in the company of a letter which had come from someone who knew his son.

" He gave John Stanton the information which he sought, and in addition wrote a long account of the wild life which he was leading.

" This seemed to prey so continually upon his father's mind that I feared that he would go mad."

"This is indeed unwelcome news to me," I said, "for I had hoped that I should become the property of someone who would understand and care for me, even as my author wished."

"Then your hopes are doomed to disappointment if my words are true," replied the letter. 'You will fail in your mission, even as I shall, and the wishes of John Stanton will remain unfulfilled. If you fail, then so must I, and if I fail, then so must you.

"This scamp of a son cannot accept the one and despise the other, for though I lay bare the heartfelt wishes of his father, it is in you that rests the results of his life's work, born of the experiences which he has undergone."

A "something" in the tone of the letter's remarks caused me to think deeply over the words, which otherwise would have been lost upon me, troubled as I was with other conflicting thoughts.

I pondered over his linking of my name with himself, when suddenly the full meaning of his words burst upon me, yet I still held doubts as I shouted, "John Stanton—John Scribe! You mean to say they are the same?"

"You have guessed correctly, friend—yet I thought that you must have known."

Oh—then did I feel that I needed strength to enable me to burst my bonds and make my way back into the hands of my author!

The chance that I had longed for had come—and I had let it pass! The opportunity was lost for ever, and the master hand that had penned me

—had held me—and I had not known! Now I was being sped along rapidly away from him upon a doomed errand!

My brain whirled and I held the loving letter close to me. I felt comforted a little by the close contact with the paper, which had unfolded to me the secrets of my birth even as it unfolded the secret longings of a father. . . .

A merciful darkness fell upon me, and I dwelt in a land peopled with fantastic forms and grinning giants who swept towards me in frantic endeavours to wrest me from the guardianship of loving hands that held me. . . .

They tore at my covers, and I felt myself being drawn high up in their fierce grip. . . . I looked down from the pinnacles of tall mountains and saw the pleasant memories of happy days fast fleeing from me.

The hand which held me hastened across a wide black chasm, in which rested strange beings unlike anything that I know. . . . For a moment I was held above them, and suddenly I was dashed among them where I lay bruised and bleeding. . . .

Above me I saw the faint outline of the face of a ghoul whose teeth showed an expression of hate which seemed to spread gradually over his face until, widening into a thick black cloud, the apparition increased in density until all was black. . . .

CHAPTER XXI

When at last I awoke, I knew that I suffered from a badly injured back, and I lay in agony for several days ere I was able to piece together the disordered thoughts that assailed me.

Slowly my senses returned to me and I realised that I had passed through the hands of a book ghoul, and that the son of John Stanton had been the cause of my nightmares.

I found that I had been thrown into a large box covered with a heavy lid which effectually prevented all light from penetrating from above, though a tiny gleam entered from the outside world through a crack in the side.

By this light I was able to see the contents of the box, all thrown together in an unhappy company. Resting beside me was an old battered tin, leaning against a piece of broken glass.

Myriads of scraps of torn paper, candle-ends, brushes, boots and bottles of all shapes and sizes were intermingled in a comradeship of adversity.

Conversation with these battered remnants was difficult, but by dint of much perseverance I was able to understand that I had been thrown among them several days ago, and that I had lain unmoved all that time.

They endeavoured to show sympathy, and later, through the kind help of a friendly rubber squeegee,

who massaged my aching back, I was able to move with less pain.

My health improved steadily, and though the quietude was often disturbed by loud voices from the room in which the box stood, I became accustomed to the unusual position in which I found myself. The uproar, however, which entered into the sepulchral box one evening was of a greater intensity than any which had preceded. The high-pitched voice of a woman (whom I had assumed from previous stormy conversations to be the landlady of the house) could be heard above the comparatively subdued voice of the man. I was able to catch nearly every word, and though the tone led me to believe the woman was angry I was interested to note that the audibility of her voice did not suffer on account of this. When at last her words did become lost in a frenzied shouting, I had heard enough to understand that my author's son was in dire trouble.

"No rent again! I won't 'ave it!" I heard her shout; then later she screamed, "You get out of 'ere. I won't 'ave nothing more to do with yer! Now 'op it. D'yer 'ear?"

Some days passed in comparative silence until one evening the lid of the box was lifted roughly and the face of a woman looked down upon us. "Is this all the luggage 'e 'ad? Fine wardrobe this!" she said as her long arm reached in amongst the contents and a grimy hand began to sort over the pieces of flotsam until such a dust arose that it caused me to cough loudly.

This seemed to attract her attention to me, for she picked me up from among the rest and read my title.

Her face showed distinct signs of disgust, and she said scornfully, "'The Seeker'—h'm, fancy 'im having a book like *this* up 'ere! Religious tosh, too, by the looks of it. There ain't a bloomin' thing in 'ere worth a penny—just my luck! Lodgers like 'im are too bloomin' artful to leave anything good layin' about!"

She held me in her hand while she went through the remaining stuff in the box with the other, and finally with a disappointed look upon her face she banged down the lid of the box and took me with her down the stairs, where she placed me upon a dusty shelf in a very dark cupboard.

* * * * *

Here I have lain for many long weeks, apparently forgotten, but I hope for happier days to come, knowing that one day I shall be discovered, and that a true lover of books will be rewarded for his searching.

My value must be increasing, and I have no means of informing the foolish slut of a woman of my predicament or of my true calling, for the cobwebs which surround me have succeeded in partially enveloping me, so that I have almost disappeared from view.

My days are spent in writing this story of my life, and fairy fingers have supplied me with the necessary materials and I write in between the lines of my pages. It will, perhaps, be very

difficult for any human being to decipher the tortuous strokes of my pen, which is a spider's leg, and the unruly weavings of the web do not run smoothly upon my coarse-textured leaves.

Though sorrow has entered into my life I find happiness in the pleasant memories which cling to me around the titles of many friends whom I met in the book world, and philosophically I labour on, until the day of my release is at hand.

My trust in the Guardian of the Golden Gates never falters, and in the solitude of this dark cell I rest until such time as he will be pleased to call me once again into the brotherhood of books and bookmen.

If my records should be read when I have been forgotten, and the style of my writing be thought strange, I hope that the understanding heart of the good reader will know that I have spoken of life, and of my adventures, in the spirit which was given me by my dear author, John Scribe.

He had a tale to tell, and entrusted me with it, and the virtue of his sincerity would not be altered by the advice of another lest he should be tempted to change his language and sacrifice his true expression upon the altar of conventionality.

Though his efforts have caused me to meet with disaster I am able to glory in his wisdom, and often obtain spiritual comfort from the truth of his writings to enlighten the dark and dreary cupboard where I remain.

* * * * *

EPILOGUE

When John Scribe's last gift to his poverty-stricken son was discovered, it came by a mysterious chance into the hands of one who knew its true value to the world, and who followed its author to his lonely grave.

Being enabled to "read between the lines," he was privileged to be the means of extracting this unusual story from the pages of this copy of "The Seeker."

Before this book was submitted for publication, it was shown to the son, Maurice Stanton, R.A., whose recent picture in the Royal Academy caused such discussion because the artist called it his "Dream Picture."

It will be remembered that this has been said to possess a most remarkable power of penetration, and the expression which is so wonderfully depicted upon the face of Christ has made the picture and its artist famous.

The inspiration for this picture came to my friend Maurice soon after he had read the previously spurned copy of "The Seeker," and he gives me permission to publish these facts, hoping that a spirit of consolation will be made manifest by the act.

John Stanton's last wishes have come true, for his son has received into his soul all that was written for him in "The Seeker," and the copy

of the book now rests in the most honoured place in the artist's library.

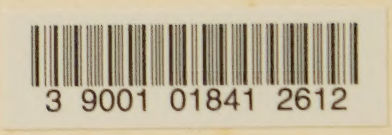
It still retains its original cloth cover, and though the title has become a little dull it sheds a light around which serves to guide its owner upon his upward path through the realms of art.

Maurice's carelessness upon the night of "The Seeker's" disaster was due to his attempts to drown his sorrows when he found that his paintings were not appreciated, and that his resources were at a low ebb.

He knew that his father "wrote a bit," but had never linked his name with John Scribe until the privilege to enlighten him was given to me. He told me that his first impression of the book upon that evening was that the book was rather dry, and without life.

This influence was due to the chain of circumstances that had temporarily deprived the copy of its compelling power at that time. Its sensitive nature had not recovered from the conversation with the letter in time to allow it to exert itself.

However, if this had been otherwise the strange workings of fate would have been directed into other channels, and the "Autobiography" would never have been written. I therefore believe that "The Seeker" discovered the secret of *it all* when he wrote of the power which "The Guardian of the Golden Gates of Literature" has upon the seemingly aimless wanderings of books.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